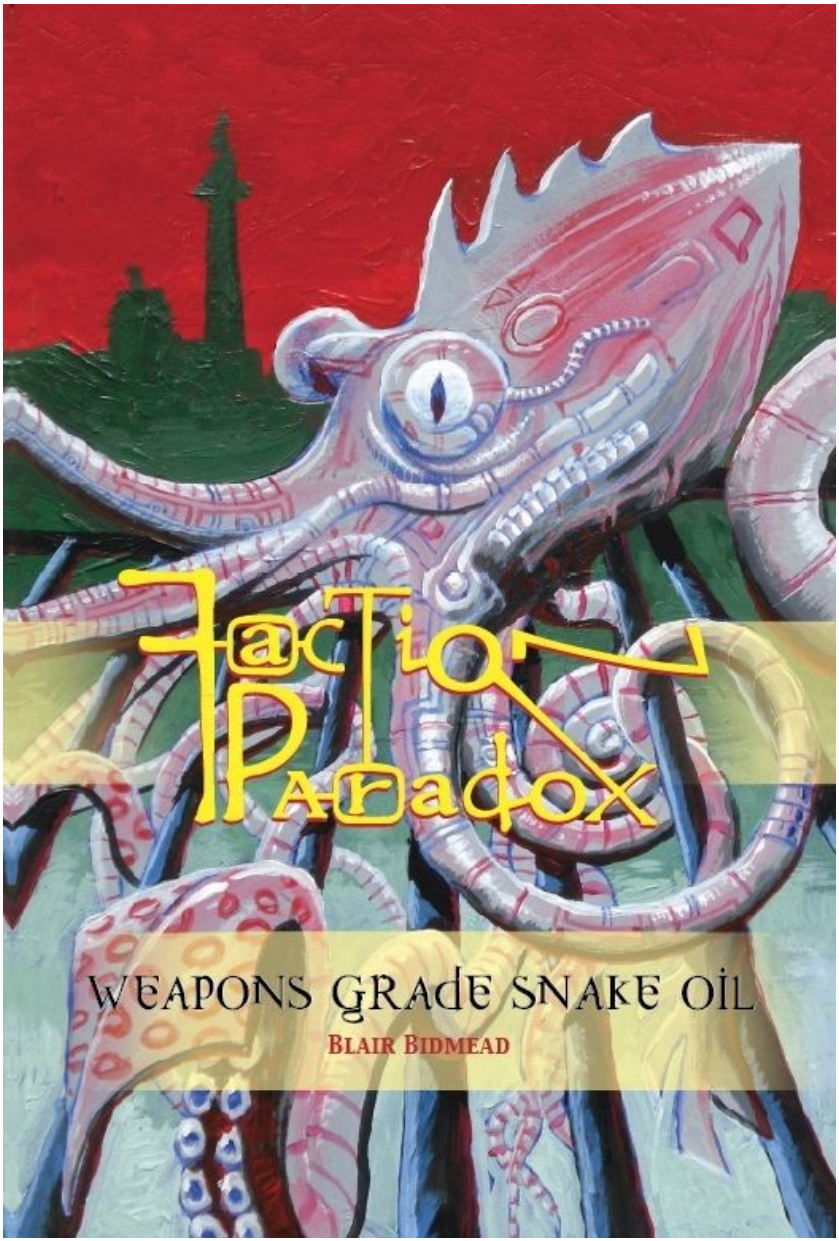
Faction Paradox
Weapons Grade Snake Oil
Blair Bidmead

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Weapons Grade Snake Oil

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For Lauren

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Finally, during the writing of this book, I lost one of my oldest friends, Leon Webster. I also lost one of my newest friends, Jenny O'Squelleton.

Both Leon and Jenny had read the first chapter of *Weapons Grade Snake Oil***, but sadly were not present for the book's completion. Here's to them and to everyone who loved them.**

A

There she goes. Running flat out. Little Sojourner. Not really dressed for a sprint. Moves pretty fast for a woman of her age though. She's carrying something. Hard to see from this far away.

Maybe, if we moved a little closer.

Sojourner has a gun in each hand. She swings them, awkwardly as she dashes across the gravel. Barefoot. Her evening dress looks a mess. That backpack looks heavy. There's a sheen to her dark skin. But, look, it isn't sweat. It's blood.

That isn't a pattern on her dress either. That's blood too. Her braids are spraying a trail of red in their wake. That's a lot of blood.

It's not her blood.

She's heading towards that building over there. A church or something. Derelict. She really is not letting up. Gasping for breath now.

Go on, Sojo. Almost there.

The door is off its hinges. She doesn't slow down, just charges through. Voices inside. Down a corridor. Crashes through some double doors.

Shouting. Screaming.

She sees Bonny. Bonny points a gun at her. Bonny looks insane with anger. She's spitting and cursing.

Sojourner sees Chaz. Chaz also points a gun at her. Chaz is swearing. Snarling. Her shadow rears up, towards Bonny. Bonny has a sword, trained on Chaz.

There's a body on the floor.

Sojourner points her guns at the pair of them. Safety catches click.

Funny how things turn out.

Act I - The Price of Everything

Chapter One: South of the River

“In 1752, Britain switched from using the Julian Calendar to the Gregorian Calendar, in line with the rest of the world. This change meant a surplus of eleven days. These spare eleven days (September 3rd-13th) were reportedly ‘sold’ to an arcane organisation known as 'Faction Paradox'.

George II's memoirs briefly mention the arrangement as a compact between Britain and an obscure foreign power. The incumbent Prime Minister, Henry Pelham, was less than reverent in his diaries, calling the compact 'An opportunity to relieve the somewhat delusional from the burden of their unfathomably abundant assets.'

It is not known what 'Faction Paradox' did with these eleven days.”

- Never Give A Sucker An Even Break: History's Dodgiest Deals

(J. Writhing-Crayfish, 1996)

Parliament was a slab of black against the scarlet sky. Inside the Elizabeth Tower, Big Ben chimed a quarter-to the hour.

On the tip of Westminster Pier, Cousin Rupert jumped at the sound of the great bell and glanced nervously over his shoulder. Behind him, Westminster Bridge reached out across the Thames and disappeared, swallowed by the ever-present mist that obscured the entire south bank.

Rupert shifted the weight of the velum dossier under his arm and adjusted his mask. The black water lapped ominously at the wooden steps in front of him. For someone who took as much pride in his position as Rupert, those three, rickety steps seemed a descent too far.

The click of footsteps behind him announced the arrival of the Godmother.

Rupert straightened his back and turned. Antigone glided towards him, her gait steady and determined. An owl-like mask hung over her face, a more intimidating version of Rupert's own. Both denoted the office of the Ministry of Insinuation and the Godmother's filigreed high-collar denoted her seniority.

“Have you rung for attention?” asked Antigone, gesturing to the

brass bell dangling from the handrail as she swept to a halt.

"I... thought it best to wait for you, Godmother," Rupert stuttered.

The Godmother clicked her tongue and folded her arms.

Flustered, Rupert reached out and rang the bell, almost dropping his paperwork into the river in the process.

A hollow chime echoed across the water.

Antigone sighed. Cousin Rupert was really too junior for the task that lay ahead of them. But, with Father Torquemada indisposed, what choice did she have? She'd be damned if she was going to reschedule at this stage.

They waited.

"I bought the information you requested, Godmother," said Rupert.

"And did you familiarise yourself with the case?" asked Antigone.

"As... far as I was able, in such a short amount of time, Godmother," Rupert replied.

"Yes, I must apologise for throwing you in the deep-end like this, Cousin," said Antigone. "It can't be helped, I am afraid. If you have any questions, you'll have plenty of time to ask them during the journey." The Godmother checked her watch. "That is, if we ever *leave* **in the first place!"**

Rupert offered to ring the bell again, but Antigone shook her head. She retrieved a mobile phone from her inside pocket, dialled a number and waited for a response.

"Hello, Cousin!" said Antigone when the line connected. Her tone was cheerful, boarding on the sarcastic. "We are waiting for you, Cousin... Yes... *Yes***... We, already** *did* **that, Cousin...Yes... That is** *why* **we are waiting... Yes, I** *know* **you didn't hear it, Cousin... If you** *had***, then that would mean you must be** *deliberately ignoring me* **and I know you wouldn't do a thing like that, would you, Cousin?... Yes... Yes, that's right!.. If you would be so kind, Cousin... Thank you, Cousin... Yes."**

She clicked off the phone and dropped it back in her pocket.

“He's coming,” Antigone sighed.

They heard him before they saw him.

First came the gentle thud and splash of a punt being pushed through the mist from the south-east. As the sound grew closer, it was accompanied by a tinny, musical hiss. It was the sound of portable headphones on much-too-high a volume. The music was loud enough that they would have recognised the hits of Percy Faith and his orchestra had Rupert not been from the wrong period of history and had Antigone not originated from an entirely different planet altogether.

The boat appeared, through the mist: a sixteen foot punt with Cousin Kharon astern, cloaked and hooded in black. The pole slid expertly through his gnarled hands and soon the punt drew alongside the pier.

Rupert took Antigone's hand and helped her aboard, keeping his composure just long enough, before stumbling onto the punt behind her.

Kharon nodded. His mask, a great, toothy fish-skull with a deep green glaze. Rupert noticed thin, white wires worming up from Kharon's robes and disappearing into the ear-holes of the skull. The mask resonated and amplified the sound from the earphones, projecting a clear, if reedy rendition of 'The Theme from a Summer Place.'

With a casual aptitude, Cousin Kharon turned the punt and steered it back the way it had come.

South of the River.

Rupert shivered.

“How much do you know about... where we are going, Cousin Rupert?” asked the Godmother.

Rupert wasn't sure where to begin. Did Antigone want to hear the gossip and innuendo or just the facts? Recounting all the rumours would take a substantial amount of time. The facts, considerably less

so.

“Well... It's where Father Christèmas... lives?” said Rupert.

Godmother Antigone's aura bristled at the very mention of the name. “Indeed,” she sneered.

“As I understand it, he... supervises a facility on Parliament's behalf,” Rupert went on.

“That is his pretext, yes,” Antigone clarified.

“He has ulterior motives?” asked Rupert.

“Why else do you think we are paying him a visit?” said the Godmother.

The boat had now become entirely enshrouded by mist. London was hidden from view on either side. Rupert wondered how Kharon was still able to navigate, but the boatman continued unabated.

Rupert still had so many questions. He was conscious that he should ask something that the Godmother would actually *want* to answer.

“The... facility is based south of the river as a safety precaution,” he said, cleverly disguising his question as a statement.

“The Thames had always acted as a partition in the donor London,” Antigone explained - She always used the term 'donor', rather than 'original' or 'real' - “When the Eleven Day Empire was founded, it was discovered that this barrier wasn't merely geographical. It functioned on a number of levels: conceptually, socially, aesthetically.”

“Ah, so this is linked to Father Christèmas's official role,” said Rupert.

Antigone nodded, “As Aquister Primate, the Father has a certain leeway with protocol. He founded the facility without sanction from Parliament. We protested most strongly at the time.”

The Godmother used the royal 'we' whenever referring to the Ministry of Insinuation, although it wasn't necessary. She had founded the Ministry right at the start, when House Paradox flounced from the Homeworld and reinvented themselves as the Faction.

Godmother Antigone *was* the Ministry.

“Parliament were very happy with the Father's acquisitions,” Antigone explained. “The Father argued that given the nature of some the collection, the location of the facility was a beneficial security measure. Parliament agreed and that was that.”

“But how did he do it?” asked Rupert. “We can't even trust the bridges to get us safely to the Southbank and yet he..!”

“You sound impressed, Cousin?” the Godmother cut him short with the accusation.

“Well...' mumbled Rupert. “To... construct such a facility...”

“He didn't construct *anything*,” said Antigone with disdain. “He *found* it. Like he *finds* everything else. That's what he does. He's a vulgar, lesser-species thief. Nothing more.”

Cousin Rupert was taken aback. He had never known the Godmother to speak in such a manner before. Antigone possessed an infamous reputation for ruthlessly dispensing her duties. But her dispassion in their delivery was equally renowned. Personal slurs were unheard of.

If he didn't know better, he would have said that Antigone's problem with Father Christèmas was personal. But to entertain that idea would have first required Rupert to think of the Godmother as a 'person'.

The mist began to thin to starboard. The sky had changed colour. It was subtle, but profound. The traditional blood-red had taken on a more artificial hue - deep pink and somehow garish.

The silhouettes of structures were now visible, angular, cuboid and sharp-edged. Nothing of the sombre, Gothic majesty of Westminster.

South of the River, its true horror revealed.

Antigone's revulsion was palpable.

“Godmother,” asked Cousin Rupert. “Father Christèmas' has a permanent staff of two?”

Antigone nodded, "Cousins Chantelle and Haribeaux."

"The files were not clear as to their functions," said Rupert.

"Cousin Chantelle predominantly works in the field, negotiations, intelligence gathering, wetwork," explained the Godmother. "Cousin Haribeaux is engaged in research at the facility. The Blue Praxis experiments are one of his projects."

"Ah, there has been some success with Blue Praxis, hasn't there?" asked Rupert.

"That's what they have told Parliament," replied Antigone, doubtfully.

Cousin Kharon slowed his movements as Bankside Pier rose from the mist. The punt slid alongside the pier and drew to a halt. The boatman bowed as Antigone and Rupert disembarked.

The Godmother turned to her subordinate. "I have informed the Aquister Primate that I expect nothing but the most stringent observation of ritual and protocol during our visit," she proclaimed with no lack of emphasis. "You, Cousin Rupert, are to record any deviation from protocol, no matter how minor, is that understood?"

Rupert nodded, "Zero tolerance, Godmother. Understood."

The duo turned and strode with purpose toward the facility.

The Ministry of Insinuation was going to show Father Christèmas just exactly who was boss.

Chapter Two: Bankside

"Ostensibly, Bankside was a giant generator located in Southwark, on the south bank of the Thames. In the first half of its existence it generated electricity. In the second half it generated culture. In the shadow London of the Eleven Day Empire, the Bankside facility was a research and development centre, often missing from the official record.

An aesthetic pariah, its industrial, modernist sensibility seen, in some quarters, as being out-of-step with the gothic, blood-and-bones of the Faction brand. Although, enough members of Parliament could see the advantages of housing some of their more unpredictable elements at Bankside - close enough to home to lay their hands on them should the need arise, but far enough away to disregard on grounds of taste."

- *Faction Paradox: A Negotiable History (S. Walmric, AF 189)*

-

Cousin Rupert's first impression of Bankside was one of abhorrence.

It did not belong.

Ever since his initiation, leaving the mundane world behind for the eminence of the Eleven Day Empire was, for him, like an ascension into some dark heaven. How could he reconcile *this* **as part of his paradise?**

"Now do you understand?" said the Godmother.

Rupert nodded.

The facility was a monstrous, almost featureless box. An angular chimney jutted from its centre, rending the sky, filling it with noxious clouds of puce and powder-blue. The structure's symmetry was edged with an unnatural flicker of vulgar, bright green light. From deep within came the thrum of vast, unholy mechanics, while the air hung heavy, pungent with sickly-sweet vapours.

Rupert and Antigone strode onwards, their steps synchronizing, becoming regal and defiant.

The main entrance was situated beneath the great chimney. As they approached, Cousin Rupert noted the first breach of protocolo no one was there to receive them. As they arrived at the main entrance, it got worse. The huge, blackened steel doors were shut and bolted from the inside.

Rupert turned to the Godmother.

Antigone froze and coiled the anger inside her. "This way," she hissed, marching briskly along the west wing of the facility.

The industrial hum grew louder as they reached the far end of the building. The west façade was filled with a colossal, folding metal door. The door was ajar slightly and smoke wafted from the pitch black interior. Antigone squeezed herself unceremoniously through the gap. Rupert attempted to do the same, but dropped his dossier, spilling its contents on the floor. He scrabbled for the pages, scooping them together untidily before following the Godmother inside.

Rupert was completely disorientated. There was no sign of Antigone. His mask filtered the worst of the sickly fumes. He adjusted his optics to compensate for the low light as best he could.

He was in a maze of infernal machines. Pistons hissed and whined. Metal scraped against metal and reverberated around the huge industrial expanse. The machinery had been painted in gaudy colours, but rust and wear had eaten them away, leaving an impression of something akin to a gingerbread abattoir.

Something moved in the periphery of his vision. Rupert turned, expecting to see the Godmother.

Instead, he faced a nightmare.

An armoured monstrosity, nine feet tall, charged at him through the smoke. It squawked with incandescent rage, hands like shovels slapping the air from his lungs and shouldering him backwards. Rupert fell, crashing the back of his head against the metal pipes, his paperwork scattering like startled pigeons.

Winded, he attempted to stand. The shrieking giant stooped to assist, clamping its fingers around Rupert's throat, lifting him from his feet and slamming him up against the machinery.

The giant continued to scream. It was a modulated, distorted assault of both high and low frequencies. Rupert took a few seconds to realise that this cacophony actually contained words.

“I said, what the hell do you think you're doing!” screeched the monster.

Fear and the compression of his windpipe prevented any coherent response from Rupert.

A backhanded slap sent his owl mask spinning from his head. The monster stepped forward, bringing its face within an inch of Rupert's nose.

The creature's head was utterly bizarre.

It was covered with something similar to a bone mask. It was bear-like and aggressive. Except, instead of bone, it was made from a yellowy, jellified substance, glistening and translucent.

From Inside this jellied animal mask, a human skull stared out.

Electronics encrusted the skull's surface, like a layer of twinkling sapphires. Hypnotic, swirling eyes housed in the sockets projected a fury teetering on the brink of sanity.

It lowered its tone, focusing its rage like a scalpel, whispering, “What. Are. *You*. Doing!”

“Put him down at once!” Antigone commanded.

The monster tilted its head.

“You heard what I said!” bellowed the Godmother.

The monster paused, then released its grip, sending Rupert crumbling to the floor.

“What do you want, Antigone?” said the creature, its anger swiftly replaced with disdain.

“We are expected, Cousin Haribeaux,” snapped the Godmother.

“Chris never mentioned it,” scoffed Haribeaux.

Rupert was coughing and scrabbling around Haribeaux's feet, retrieving his scattered documents and his missing mask.

“Take me to him, *immediately*,” demanded Antigone.

“I'm busy!” moaned Haribeaux.

The Godmother stepped forward and craned her neck in an attempt to look the nine foot Cousin straight in the eye.

“Now!” she hissed.

Haribeaux rumbled with rage. His swirling eyes projected pure hatred towards Antigone. For a moment Rupert thought Haribeaux was going to strike the Godmother. But instead, the giant turned and stormed off, swearing and cursing under his breath. Godmother Antigone followed at a brisk pace. Cousin Rupert stumbled on behind.

When he eventually caught up, Antigone and Haribeaux were in pointed conversation.

“We need to see all the Blue Praxis results, Cousin” ordered Antigone.

“Parliament already have everything!” Haribeaux grumbled.

“We have read the report. We want to see the results themselves,” Antigone insisted.

“Why!? It's not finished yet! Why don't you just stop wasting my time!” Haribeaux raged.

“Are you refusing our request?” asked Antigone.

Haribeaux growled.

They arrived at a large goods lift. Haribeaux slid back the cage door and gestured for them to enter.

“Take it all the way to the top,” he said, angrily slamming the door behind them once they were inside.

Antigone pressed the button and the lift began to rise.

Rupert shuffled his documents, “Cousin... Haribeaux...” he said,

then failed to find any further words.

“He's a thug,” said Antigone, “But his work is of vital importance to Parliament.”

“What... *happened* **to him?” asked Rupert.**

“He was omniplegic when he came to the Faction,” Antigone explained. “His body was rebuilt to his own specifications.”

“Why would anyone choose to look like that?” said Rupert.

“Artistic temperament?” mused Antigone. “Surely, you must have noticed that he is very much insane?”

Rupert rubbed his Adam's apple ruefully. If a creature like Haribeaux was merely a subordinate, then what could he expect from an audience with Father Christèmas himself?

Chapter Three: Meeting Father Christèmas

"I am here, Sir Christèmas.
Welcome, my Lord Sir Christèmas!
Welcome to all, both more and less!
Come near, Come near..."

- *Sir Christèmas (R.Smart, 1437-77)*

Father Christèmas was naked.

He stood, staring out of the huge window which filled the entire wall on the far side of the gallery. In his right hand dangled a hefty Bakelite telephone. His left hand held the receiver to his ear and he was quietly laughing, lost in conversation.

He appeared not to notice Antigone and Rupert as they entered the gallery.

Although dwarfed by Haribeaux's Turbine Hall, the upper gallery was a large, open-plan space. There were artefacts from the collection dotted haphazardly, here and there - some potentially quite dangerous, Rupert observed - but this space was clearly used primarily as Christèmas's living quarters.

There was an unmade four-poster bed in the far, right-hand corner, next to a clothes-rail and a mirrored dressing screen. The left-hand side of the room was dominated by a cluttered, oak writing desk, a winged office chair and an informal seating area.

Christèmas turned. Spotting his visitors, a smile of surprise curled across his lips.

Apparently in his fifties, Christèmas's frame was pale, wiry and entirely hairless. The lack of eyebrows accentuated the inscrutability of his watery-blue eyes.

His hands were covered with blood.

The telephone dripped with it. The receiver ran red. The wires seemed threaded with dark, glistening beads that rolled down the coils and gently rained to the floor.

“I'll have to call you back,” Father Christèmas drawled, replacing the receiver on the bloody phone. “My dear!” he said, addressing the Godmother, “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“You know full well,” replied Antigone, her tone flat and business-like.

“Should we have been expecting you?” asked Christèmas, innocently. “I'm sorry. It's these Blue Praxis experiments of Harry's. Despite all our precautions, we're still getting the odd time discrepancy. I missed his birthday because of them! He was livid, as you can imagine...”

“Father,” said Antigone, impassively, “Get dressed. There are things we need to discuss.”

Christèmas nodded and strolled across the room, casually dropping the phone into a marble, blood-filled font on the way. He disappeared behind the screen and could be heard filling a washing basin with water.

Antigone glided over to the desk, cleared a space and made herself comfortable on the office chair. She held out her hand to Rupert, who stepped forward and passed her the dossier that he had brought from Westminster.

As she flicked through the file, Rupert glanced out of the window and was surprised to find a clear view of St. Paul's cathedral on the opposite side of the river. He was appalled by this. Bankside was invisible from the north bank, but Christèmas was able to look down on the Faction-proper from this vantage point. How was this possible?

“Godmother,” whispered Rupert. “The bloody telephone?”

“He was communicating with the loa,” muttered Antigone. “Or, at least, wants us to *think* that that was what he was doing. A deliberately provocative distortion of ritual. Make a note of it.”

The very mention of the loa within such a mundane context as a telephone call disgusted Rupert. The loa were the holiest of holy spirits, entities formed of history itself. These spirits protected the Eleven Day Empire from hostile incursions. In return, the Faction faithful offered sacrifice. Communing with the loa always involved ritual of the utmost

piety.

And blood.

There was a crash from the other side of the room. Rupert looked over to see that Father Christèmas had knocked over and smashed the mirrored screen. He was now fully dressed in the red robes of a catholic cardinal, except the chain around his neck displayed an oversized, silver time-piece rather than a crucifix.

The reason for the breakage was that Christèmas was also wearing his own ceremonial bone mask. It was, frankly, ludicrous. Seemingly belonging to some sort of aquatic mammal, the mask was smooth, with a long pointed snout. Protruding from the snout was long, spear-like tusk of around two meters in length.

"Oops!" said Christèmas, staggering left and right, desperately trying to regain his balance. His huge head wobbled drunkenly, swinging the tusk in an awkward figure-of-eight. "Harry was supposed to have fixed the gyroscope on this!" he grumbled. "Hang on. I'm getting the hang of it. Whoa!"

He ran forward a few steps, then steadied himself on the back foot. He took the stance of a tightrope walker and slowly made his way across the gallery towards them.

"Father..." said Antigone.

Christèmas flicked his head right. The tusk swung, knocking a porcelain statuette from its plinth, which smashed on the floor.

"Father!" screamed Antigone, jumping from her chair. She tore the owl-mask from her head and slammed it on the desk in front of her. "Let us *not* stand on ceremony!"

The Godmother unmasked was twice as intimidating as otherwise. A severe, bleached countenance, with sharp brow, nose and chin, Antigone had dark penetrating eyes, flecked with the tell-tale purple of the Homeworld high-caste. Her white hair was tied back and elaborately braided with silver cord. The air of her authority was as singular as any of the oldest aristocracy.

"Well, if you're sure," said Christèmas, removing his unwieldy

headgear and tossing it, tusk first into a nearby aspidistra pot. "You're usually such a stickler for protocol."

"Please, take a seat, Father," said the Godmother, her composure returned.

Christèmas sat, crossed his legs and smiled.

Antigone leafed through the file in front of her. "We have been invited by Parliament to conduct a full audit of the Bankside collection," she explained.

"Really?" said Christèmas, "How tiresome for you."

"We will need to see that the Blue Praxis experiments are progressing as successfully as the reports suggest," Antigone went on.

"Not a problem," said Christèmas, pulling a mobile phone from his pocket. "I'll have a word with Harry."

"We'll need to interview all your staff," said the Godmother.

"Well, Harry will be more than happy for a chat," said Christèmas, "I'm afraid Chaz is... indisposed."

"*All* your staff," Antigone reiterated.

"She's offsite," Christèmas explained, his tone sharpening slightly. "Engaged in some very delicate negotiations. I'll get her to drop in and see you when she returns."

"Are you telling us that Cousin Chantelle is entirely unreachable?"

"Not exactly..."

"If you are able contact her, do so now. Tell her that we require her presence immediately."

"Listen," hissed Christèmas, waving an index finger. "Parliament employ me to do a job..."

"As they employ *us*!" snapped Antigone. "You do not exceed the jurisdiction of the Ministry! Our office protects the protocols prescribed by the Grandfather himself!"

“Oh, please,” sighed Christèmas, rolling his eyes.

“You dispute our authority?” asked the Godmother, daring him to do so.

Father Christèmas paused, then smiled. “Of course not, Godmother,” he purred, obsequiously. “If you'll excuse me for a moment, I'll just gather my staff for you.”

He climbed to his feet and clicked his mobile phone.

In the Turbine Hall, Haribeaux answered Christèmas' call.

“What?”

“Harry, the Godmother needs to speak to you.”

“Tell her to piss off!”

“You'll be right up? Good! Could you also please do me a favour?”

“Fuck sake, Chris!”

“Please call Chaz. Tell her to get back here pronto.”

“Why can't you bloody do it?”

“I'd do it myself, but I am entertaining Godmother Antigone at the moment. Many thanks!”

Harry growled.

Chris hung up.

“They're on their way,” said Christèmas, dropping the phone back in his pocket. “Can I offer you anything to drink, Antigone? Or maybe your... assistant? I am sorry, I don't believe I've had the pleasure…” He stepped forward, offering Rupert his hand.

Rupert looked to the Godmother for a clue on how to react. When none was forthcoming, he took Christèmas's hand and shook it. “Cousin Rupert,” said Rupert, his grip tightening a little too much.

Christèmas smirked, “Nice grip, Rupert. Torquemada not with you?”

“We require no refreshment, Father,” said Antigone. “Please take a seat.”

Christèmas let go of Rupert's hand and draped himself over a nearby chaise lounge.

“How is Cousin Chantelle currently engaged?” asked the Godmother.

“A fact-finding mission,” said Christèmas, plucking imaginary lint from his left shoulder, “Nothing particularly time-sensitive, I suppose.”

“Has it anything to do with the 2nd Second?” said Antigone.

Christèmas smiled.

“Now, Godmother,” he replied, “Whatever gave you *that* **impression?”**

Chapter Four: Landslide On Pluto

"Often overlooked are the minor worlds of the Plutoid Republic. Since the expansion of the sun and the obliteration of the Earth, the Solar System may, at first, seem a pointless destination. But, the mining communities of Pluto, Eris, Haumea and their sister planetoids have a simple charm and an endearing share and share alike ethos. Visitors are made to feel welcome, but remember, Cymbionts have equal status on all PROTEC worlds, so it might be best leave the old retainer at home!"

- *Posthumanity on a Budget (I. Thul, 50^9 7031)*

The day had come.

The impossible had been achieved.

A civilization had spoken, history had responded and a republic had been born.

The strikes were a distant memory. The riots now a thing of the past. The uprising was complete. The Plutonic Republic Of Technosapien Enhanced Cultures - PROTEC - had been forged and a head of state universally endorsed.

Sojourner Hooper-Agogô was elected as the first president of the new republic in a landslide victory. She had faced little serious competition. Even her opponents supported her presidency quite openly. She had led the revolution and now she would lead the republic to a glorious future: from each according to their heightened abilities, to each according to their multifaceted needs.

Today, a line would be drawn between a past filled with exploitation and a future filled with hope.

Today was a time for celebration.

Banners unfurled and fireworks filled the sky. The streets of Hades, Pluto's capital city, were filled with waving flags, ringing bells and chanting the affectionate nickname by which the new president had always been known. "So! Jo! So! Jo!"

From inside the howdah of her gigantic mechanical mammoth, Sojourner grinned.

“Slowdown a little, Ellie,” she said, “Let everyone savour the moment.”

L-Event, her colossal robot companion, obliged, reducing the pace to a dawdle.

Sojourner waved through the windows at the crowd far below. L-Event projected images of this on huge screens on either side of her gigantic metallic body, for the benefit of those too far away to see.

“I can't believe this is Hades,” she muttered, “Look at it, Ellie!”

The mammoth scanned the immediate area. Hades was still the sprawling, industrial conurbation it had always been. But today, instead of workers and their cymbiont familiars toiling in the city-sized factories, they were on the streets shrieking with joy. L-Event had no records of any celebrations on this scale before.

They arrived at the new government’s headquarters, a massive ziggurat of glass, still under reconstruction since being damaged in the final days of the uprising. It had previously housed the representatives of the company who had enslaved the people of Pluto for generations. Now it would administer to the needs of the many, instead of just the few.

A silver bridge unfurled from the ziggurat and connected to L-Event's howdah with a gentle clunk.

“How do I look?” asked Sojourner, nervously.

L-Event scanned the Lady President. She was dressed in her usual orange and yellow hi-viz overalls and steel toe-capped boots. Her hair was slate-grey, flecked with silver, braided and tied back for functional rather than aesthetic reasons. For a woman in her mid-fifties, her dark brown skin was remarkably flawless. Although, if you looked deep into her eyes, you could find every single moment of the years of struggle etched there, indelibly and forever.

“You look like the Lady President, Sojourner,” said L-Event.

“I love you, Ellie,” said Sojourner.

The mammoth reciprocated wordlessly and opened the doors to the bridge.

The crowds roared.

The bells rang out. That incessant 'ding-dong' sound had long been the music of defiance. During the struggle, a factory had ceased production of armour-plate for the company and instead churned out and distributed millions of two-pronged hand bells - the agogô bell - in a show of support of Sojourner's cause.

The Lady President walked along the bridge, smiling and waving to the world. She looked ahead to the platform where she would give her address. The sight that greeted her made her emotions finally get the better of her.

Tears of joy welled in her eyes when she saw her family waiting.

Her husband, Rex, emanated a deep and stoic pride. Her daughter, Rez, beamed and clapped with unabashed excitement and, running towards her, arms outstretched, was her three year old granddaughter, Anami. Sojourner ran forward and scooped the little girl into her arms, kissing her cheeks and hugging her tightly.

The new President joined the rest of her family. She embraced them, kissed them, laughed with them. Then, passing her granddaughter to her husband, she turned to address the people.

The speech had been one worthy of the history books.

All who heard it could not have failed to be moved. She spoke of the past struggles, of how the company had treated the people. How they had not even been considered *as* people, due to their augmentation. The neural links forged with their robotic familiars were seen as chains, shackling them to their company-owned machines, their flesh and blood regarded as merely a cheap and convenient component.

But these links were not chains. They were *connections*. Through them, the workers became intimate with the means of production. Once this had happened, the battles that followed were merely the violent death throes of the company, struggling with its own obsolescence.

The cymbiont uprising was as much a matter of *evolution* as it was revolution.

She spoke with passion and conviction about the task that lay ahead. She thanked her family for their unfaltering support. She praised the people for their indefatigability and she humbly accepted the office of the PROTEC Presidency.

Then, the Hooper-Agogô family waved to the crowd, threaded their arms together and walked into the glass ziggurat to prepare for the evening celebrations. They stepped through the doors into a vast, empty reception area.

"You did it," whispered Rex into his wife's ear.

"*We* did it, babe," Sojourner replied, "All of us."

As she spoke, her techonciousness projected an amity pulse to L-Event, who in turn, amplified and broadcast the sentiment across the subæther. In a microsecond, cymbionts across the republic received and reciprocated.

We did it.

"Mum," said Rez, "I am going to see if I can get Anami to sleep for an hour or so before the party."

"OK, sweetheart," said her mother, kissing them both. Rez took Anami from her father and disappeared into the complex.

Rex looked at his wife. "Does this mean we actually have a minute to *ourselves*?" he asked in mock surprise. Sojourner laughed, "Would we know what to *do* with a minute to ourselves?" she replied. They entwined fingers. She gazed at her husband and remembered the beautiful young medic she had fallen for all those years ago. His hairline may have since receded, but his eyes were as sharp as ever. She had never known a more patient, more compassionate man.

"Sojourner, can I please have a word?" said a new voice.

The Lady President stared at her husband for a moment longer. Then, the both of them burst out laughing. "That was *your* fault!" she hooted, "You jinxed it!" They turned to the new speaker. It was Mason, her PA.

Mason was a short, pale, red-haired thirty-something with green, apologetic eyes. "Amazing speech, Sojo," Mason added, "One of your

best ever."

"I'm going to make tea," said Rex to his wife. He kissed her, turned and walked away.

"I'll be five minutes!" Sojourner shouted after him, "Time me!"

Rex smiled, waved and was gone.

"So, what's up?" asked Sojourner. It was only then that she noticed that Mason wasn't alone.

About ten feet behind him stood a woman.

She was white, in her twenties and hard-faced, with her dark, straight hair pulled tight into a high ponytail. She was dressed in a black bomber jacket, leggings and boots. Her fingers were covered with gold jewellery and her cruel lips tugged aggressively on a cigarette.

"There's someone here who needs to speak to you," said Mason, confidentially.

"Why can't she just come to the party, like everyone else?" sighed the President.

"She says it's urgent and of a... *personal* **nature," whispered Mason.**

"Mason..."

"She claims to be your cousin…"

"My... *what***?"**

Something moved between Mason and the smoking woman.

The PA continued to talk, but Sojourner could no longer hear him. She was mesmerised by the shadow rearing up behind him.

The shadow loomed, silently, brandishing its weapon. The silhouette of a claw-hammer danced above Mason's oblivious head. He continued to speak and Sojourner continued not to hear a word he said.

The smoking woman's eyes shone with steel.

"I'll deal with this, Mason," said the president. "Could you give us a

moment, please?"

The shadow vanished.

Mason left.

The woman finished her cigarette, dropped the stub on the floor and crushed it under her boot.

Chapter Five: Take The Girl Out Of The Faction

"The **Sombras Que Corta** *(literally '***shadows that cut***') were developed from a side-effect of the Faction's experiments with removing objects from time. It emerged that, when it came to erasing items from the timeline, one needed to be thorough, else the 'meaning' of the object could be left behind.*

In typical style, the problem was turned to an advantage by the Faction's armourers. Personal side arms were considerably more discrete when they didn't appear to exist. But, shadow weapons also had a second, more totemic function. They stood as a constant reminder to their wielder, that even though time could be rewritten, the past was always quite capable of coming back to bite you on the arse."

- *Faction Paradox: A Negotiable History (S. Walmric, AF 189)*

"How did you find me?" said Sojourner.

"Never lost yee," said the woman.

Her accent was heavy Geordie. Sojourner was surprised she could still recognise something like that after all this time.

"You've always know where I was?" said Sojourner.

"Me? I divvnt knaa owt," said the woman. "Divvnt care."

The Lady President sighed, "Who are you?"

The woman smiled, "Ahm yer Cousin, pet,"

A tiny grain of darkness ached in Sojourner's heart. The grit in the oyster that made the pearl.

"What can I do for you, '*cuz***'?"**

"Somewhere private, like?"

Reluctantly, Sojourner led the woman into a nearby office and closed the door. The woman made straight for the drinks cabinet as Sojourner gazed out of the window. She could see L-Event outside amongst the crowds. She could feel the mammoth's concern and confusion.

What's going on, Sojourner?

With an apology, the Lady President muted her connection to L-Event, then turned back to face the woman.

Her Cousin had poured herself a large scotch before lighting another cigarette. She took a hefty swig of her drink. "Canny whisky, that, like," she announced with approval.

"Left behind from when the Company vacated Pluto," the president explained, "They liked the expensive shit. Never acquired the taste for it myself. Where are you from?"

The woman puffed her cigarette and threw Sojourner a 'like you don't know' glare.

"I meant *originally*," Sojourner clarified. "You're obviously from Earth, North East England. But, what period? Late twentieth, early twenty-first century?"

The woman shrugged and nodded.

"Thought so," said Sojourner, "Me too. Well, not *me*. Not who I am *now*. Who I was *before*. The *other* me."

The Lady President scrutinized her Geordie Cousin. The woman in front of her was half her age. If neither of them had been drawn into the Faction's orbit, they would have been contemporaries. They would have witnessed the same events, listened to same music, watched the same telly.

Now, here they were on Pluto, billions of years in the future. Sojourner has spent her whole, new life helping shape a potential utopia and now it was going to be snatched from underneath her. She reached out for her own shadow weapon, then remembered it was no longer there. It hadn't been there for several decades.

"I won't go back," said Sojourner. Her voice was level but her eyes burned with intensity.

"Divvnt want y'back," said her Cousin with a sneer. "Want y' *here*. Part of the plan, like."

The president wasn't buying it.

Sojourner had signed on with the Faction when she had been young and desperate. She had taken on the name they had assigned her and become 'Cousin Ceol'. It had been a means to an end. Nothing more. Once that end had been achieved, her every waking moment was focused on devising herself a means of escape.

No one left the Faction and lived, so Cousin Ceol had to die.

There was ample opportunity for the devoted to do just that. Cousin Ceol was keen to demonstrate this devotion, but not before planning her rebirth contingency. It was a fiddly and time consuming process, ferreting away tiny slivers of unadulterated biodata. The amounts had to be small as not to arouse suspicion and also to strip away anything tainted by Faction interference. It had been a rebirth of a thousand cuts.

She had found a suitably mundane site for her resurrection, a genetic printer in some dodgy, backstreet cosmetic clinic on an insignificant posthuman colony. She had customised the printer, so instead of fixing noses or enhancing breasts, it would weave her new self in its entirety, using the stolen biodata. All she then had to do was upload her consciousness and send Cousin Ceol away to do her duty.

Sojourner Hooper had been born and had to hit the ground running.

In order to cover her tracks, the world of her rebirth was one that was scheduled to die in a natural, planet-killing event, a few hours after the start of her new life. She had barely escaped as a refugee in the last transport ship to leave, before freak solar flares wiped the surface of the planet clean with flame.

The perfect crime.

Back then, she had no idea she would end up on Pluto, let alone as the leader of millions of people. All that couldn't have been planned by the Faction. Could it?

“Was a canny trick, like,” said the woman, genuinely impressed. “Getting yorsel killed like that. Fucked you up good and proper, how. Y’would never catch me signing up for a mission like that, man. Suicidal, that. S'pose that was the point, mind. Still, fucking mental. Fucked up your history so bad, your ancestors *and* your descendants

would have felt it."

Cousin Ceol never stood a chance. Especially as all Sojourner had left her old self with, in terms of personality, was the 'devoted acolyte' persona she had been hiding behind for decades. It was a persona so well worn, it could drive Ceol's hollow remains around as convincingly as her true self once did.

What was that? Parliament are looking for volunteers for a mission to Mohandassa, during the House Military incursion? Sign me up!

Boom.

Goodbye, Ceol.

"But, she isn't *me*," said Sojourner.

"Nah, but she used to be yee, like," said the woman.

"It was a completely *different* life," Sojourner insisted.

"Aye, y'could argue that. Philosophically speaking, like," the woman admitted, drawing deep on her cigarette. "Ah divvint give a fuck aboot aal that shite. We got a job for yee and yee are ganin' to fookin' dee it, alreet?"

"OK then, if you are saying that Ceol and me are the same," the Lady President spat, "If we *are* both the same person, then I already *died* for the Faction, didn't I!? I followed Parliament's orders, I fought for their cause and I *died* for it! Doesn't that count for *anything*!?"

"Ain't from Parliament," said the woman.

Sojourner froze. Her mind whirled. "Parliament didn't send you?" she said, as much for her own benefit as anything else.

"Nah," said the woman, taking another slug of scotch. "This job is off the books, like,"

"Who *are* you?" Sojourner muttered, confused. "Who do you... represent?"

"I'm Chantelle," said her Cousin. "Call me Chaz. From Sooth o' the River."

Sojourner's eyes widened. She steadied herself on a desk before carefully lowering herself into a chair.

“Father Christèmas,” she whispered.

Chaz drained her glass and smiled.

Chapter Six: You Shall Go To The Ball

"The Chance Coteries would seem like an impractical choice of destination for those with limited resources. Indeed, there are certain worlds within the Coteries that demand visitors have access to a level of capital that would be completely prohibitive to the budget traveller.

However, Serendipity Keep - arguably the jewel in the Chance Coteries' crown - exercises an equal opportunities policy. The Keep's credo is 'The Stake is Sacred' - meaning that the size of an individual stake is of no object, it is the stake's sacrifice to chance which is important thing.

Perhaps, it is the willingness to deal with the small change in its devotion to chance, that has led to The Keep's success for the last half a millennium."

- *Posthumanity on a Budget (I. Thul, 50^9 7031)*

Sojourner's eyes zoned in and out of focus.

Chantelle was still talking, but the president couldn't hear anything she said. The situation was worse than could have ever been imagined. She may have been deluding herself that there was a slim chance of negotiating with Parliament. But Father Christèmas was an infamous law unto himself. Chantelle had all the leverage to get Sojourner to do whatever was wanted of her.

She ached to reach out to L-Event for support, but to do so would be to taint her beloved Ellie with the poison of her past. She would delay that inevitability for as long as she was able.

Sojourner felt a glass being pressed into her hand. The smell of whisky wafted into her sinuses.

"Get tha doon yee, man," said Chaz, impatiently. "OK, you've had a propa shock, like. You need to snap oot of it, but. Yee need to listen to us. If y'dee exactly what us say, then Parliament need never know aboot your canny little trick an yee can keep gan on wi' yee fookin' robots and shite, alreet?"

The Lady President nodded slowly. She sipped the scotch and listened.

“Does tha n’yem 'Scacia De Rein' mean owt to yee?” Chaz asked.

“She's something big in the Chance Coteries, isn't she?” said Sojourner.

“Aye,” said Chaz. “She's the Indeterminatrix of Serendipity Keep. She's ganin' invite yee to a party soon, like. Yee are ganin' accept.”

“What? Why is she going to invite *me*?”

“In light of yer new position, like.”

Sojourner felt nauseated. This was getting worse by the second. If they expected her to accept the hand of friendship from those leeches at Serendipity Keep, they could think again! The Chance Coteries were asset-worshiping zealots. She hadn't led the people out from under the Company's boot in order to just slide them under Scacia De Rein's stiletto-heel. She would rather die.

Although, as recent events had proven, dying would not necessarily immunise her from the Faction's means of persuasion.

“I won't do it,” said Sojourner, but even to her ears, the statement contained a palpable lack of conviction.

“Haddaway an shite, man!” snapped Chaz, draining the last of her scotch. “Ya dee as ya telt! Divvnt get fookin' radge, like! All yee gannin dee is gan to the Keep's celebrations with muckle fookin' posh coonts and that. Then, ya gan yem! Nee bother, like.”

“So, I just go to this party. Then I come back. That's it?”

“Aye,”

“I'm not expected to spy or sign any treaties or..?”

“Nah, man.”

It sounded too good to be true. There was probably a very good reason for that.

Whichever way she styled it, Sojourner's presidency would be tarnished by the mere act of accepting any such invitation. There was no benefit for the PROTEC to be seen aligning themselves with the Chance Coteries. Quite the reverse, in fact. It would be seen as an act

of pure hypocrisy on Sojourner's part.

PROTEC was an ideal built from the cooperation of workers. The Chance Coteries didn't have workers — only customers, owners and slaves.

A telephone was ringing.

Chaz tutted and reached into her pocket. She retrieved her phone, checked the caller ID and with a snort of exasperation, took the call.

"What?... Haway, man, *now!?*... Boh! Fookin' bitch, man! Alreet! Ahm comin', Harry, man! Calm doon!"

Chaz ended the call and muttered, "Prick." Then she turned back to Sojourner. "Got te gan," she said, dropping her cigarette stub in her empty glass on the table. "We'll be in touch, but."

"Wait," said Sojourner, "You can't just leave it like this!"

"Ah says, we'll be in touch, man!" Chaz barked, then she looked over Sojourner's shoulder and said, "Yer elephant is scratchin' te get in, like."

Sojourner turned to see the end of L-Event's trunk pressed against the window. Her cameras and surveillance sensors were all trained on the room. The president could feel the mammoth's insentient, nagging reconnection requests, pinging away in the back of her brain.

She turned back to Chantelle, but her Cousin had gone.

Sojourner sighed. She took another sip of whisky, then reconnected with L-Event. A wave of questions swamped her techonciousness.

Who was that, Sojourner? What's going on? Why did you disconnect us? You never usually disconnect us, Sojourner. Why did you do it? What did that woman want? Why are you so sad, Sojourner? Why are you scared? Why won't you let me help? What is going on, Sojourner? May I have access to your thoughts, please, Sojourner?

"Ellie, please," Sojourner whispered. It was too much.

L-Event ceased her cross-examination. Instead, she bolstered the Lady President's psychological resolve with a wave of undiluted

affection. Sojourner reciprocated. For some time, they sat, silently together, basking in solicitude, until the boundary that denoted woman from mechanical mammoth became blurred by mutual affection.

After a time, Sojourner climbed to her feet feeling revitalised. She cursed herself for the way she had handled Chantelle. She was the Lady President of PROTEC, for pity's sake! The Mother of the Cymbiont Revolution! She'd seen off the Company, stared down their demagogue executives and shrugged off their amassed security hordes like they were nothing. Why had she now folded into a gibbering mess in front of one, spiteful little Geordie?

Part of her had always known that there was an outside chance of the Faction finding her one day. The more circumstances made her conspicuous, the more the likelihood of discovery became. But her tenacity grew in tandem with her standing. The more she dealt with what fate presented, the more she felt able to deal with anything at all.

Admittedly, Sojourner had not foreseen herself ever being of interest to someone like Father Christèmas. Is that what had thrown her? Amongst the Faction, the Bankside crew's reputation was notorious, but no, that wasn't it.

L-Event informed her that Rex was calling.

“Tell him, I'm on my way up,” said Sojourner.

Chapter Seven: Things Happen At Sea

"The Day that Rackham was executed, by special Favour, he was admitted to see her, but all the Comfort she gave him, was, that she was sorry to see him there, but if he had fought like a Man, he need not have been hang'd like a Dog.

She was continued in Prison, to the Time of her lying in, and afterwards reprieved from Time to Time, but what is become of her since, we cannot tell; only this we know, that she was not executed."

- *A General History of Robberies and Murders of the most notorious Pyrates (Capt. C. Johnson, 1724)*

Captain James "Porkbelly" Coker stepped forward.

He regarded his captive through narrow eyes: his weather-beaten countenance charted a detailed history of maritime ignominy. Nothing in his manner betrayed his internal sense of unease. He found it hard to fathom himself.

His faithful crew encircled the intruder, blades and pistols drawn and positioned in a ring of lethal compass points. They cackled and leered as was the wont of his merry band of godless cutthroats.

Although surrounded, hopelessly outnumbered and outgunned, the woman stood impassive.

She was dressed in boots and britches and a flamboyant, white shirt. Gold hoops hung from her ears and her hair was a brilliant cascade of scarlet ringlets. Her pale, elfin face was freckled but stern and her emerald eyes met Porkbelly's gaze with matched intensity.

Poised on the deck of *The Black Diana* **as though it were a stage, the woman waited patiently, for her audience to settle. She gathered herself, as if to perform a song or perhaps a recital of verse. The only clues that her intentions were anything other than benign were the pistol in her left hand and the cutlass in her right.**

Porkbelly touched the brim of his tricorn. He greeted her, his voice a menacing, Bristolian rasp.

"G'day, milady."

The woman gave a curt nod. “Captain Coker,” she replied. Porkbelly detected an Irish lilt. She knew who he was, which pleased the Captain in a certain way, but disturbed him in another.

“And to what do we owe the pleasure of your company on this fine afternoon?” asked Porkbelly.

“Piracy,” the woman replied.

The crew erupted with laughter. They roared their approval, each twisted face a rictus of spiteful mirth and spittle. Porkbelly remained deadpan.

“May I enquire as to whom is planning to rob me, milady?” the Captain asked. “I see no ship within a thousand miles of our current position. Which makes your presence here all the more perplexing, I have to say.”

The Black Diana **had not seen port for over three months. Even if Porkbelly believed this woman could have been stowed, unseen for such a prolonged period of time, her appearance was too unsullied to have suffered such a lengthy ordeal. Her clothes and hair were as pristine as those belonging to an empress. Her complexion did not betray that of one living long in darkness on naught but piss and hard-tack.**

A brief smile wafted across the woman's face.

Someone walked over Porkbelly's grave.

“Who are you?” he demanded.

“My name is Anne Bonny.”

A murmur ran through the crew.

“Anne Bonny is in chains in Jamaica,” said the Captain, “Has been for years.”

“Well, that *is* where I disappeared from the historical record, true,” the woman admitted. “But, now I am here.” A fire lit behind her emerald eyes. Porkbelly sensed that her performance had at last begun.

“Tell me, Captain,” Bonny asked, steel creeping into her tone, “do you know when *you* vanish from the historical record?”

Porkbelly said nothing.

“Or your ship? Or your crew? Do you know when they... *disappear*?”

Porkbelly did not understand these questions, but gave nothing away.

Bonny took a step toward the Captain. The crew flinched, brandished their weapons more tightly, their eyes flicked to Porkbelly for guidance.

“It's interesting,” said Anne, “Even though your ship is currently carrying the vast proportion of the *Ganj-I-Sawai's* fabled plunder, there is no record of Captain Porkbelly, *The Black Diana* or her crew ever having existed!”

Something unanchored itself in Bonny's reason. She stuck out her chin and grinned like a shark, her eyes blazing with demonic verve.

Porkbelly's eyelids twitched.

She was *threatening* him. She was standing on *his* ship, surrounded by *his* crew. A crew who, in their piratical career, had tortured and killed more people than they were able to count, and she was *daring* him to make a move on her! Was she mad?

No. It was worse than that. She was *confident*.

How could she know he had Long Ben Avery's missing haul in the *Diana*'s hold? How did she get here, the middle of the South Pacific, without any other boat in sight? If she really was who she claimed, how did she come to be free from her Jamaican incarceration in the first place?

Porkbelly passed his gaze over his crew. His loyal, ferocious, fun-loving boys. Maniacs and simpletons all. They could not see how *wrong* all this was. It was just another escapade to them. They but waited for his word to fillet the insolent wench and be done with it.

The Captain unsheathed his sword. What else was he supposed to

do?

“History,” he growled, “has yet to be written, Miss Bonny!”

Anne chuckled, “Oh, *indeed*, **my Captain!”**

The Black Diana **lurched violently.**

The crew were flung in all directions.

Anne Bonny threw back her head, laughing with malicious glee.

Then she began to kill everyone in sight.

Chapter Eight: Worse Things Happen At Sea

*"Re - Homeworld Renegade Operative #1,003 (aka. '***The Hussar***')*

*The operative continues to restrict activities to a confined period of human history. The toe, so to speak, continues to test the bath-water. Despite the vulgar nature of said activities, we see no pressing need to intercept the operative at this juncture. The operative's affinity with the Rogue Timeship (Familiar #09, aka. '***The Kraken***') could even be seen as an advantage. At the very least, the bonding of the pair reduces the number of potentially unpredictable elements by one. As Wilde I'm sure will say, how kind of fate to bond them to each other, and so make two entities damned rather than four, and – of course- surely, 'predictable' takes precedence over 'desirable'?*

Either way, we will keep an eye on them."

- *Memo from Robert Scarratt, House Xianthellipse to Lord Nybeckarlaxinthelle, House Lineacrux*

Somewhere, deep below, timbers creaked and splintered.

Porkbelly tumbled across the deck.

Anne Bonny swiped with her sword, its blade so unnaturally keen that it passed through her opponents' weapons and limbs as though they were made of smoke. Two dozen disconnected limbs and the shattered remains of swords rained down upon the deck, amidst the torrential downpours of claret.

The amputees' screams were obliterated by Bonny's nightmarish pistol. Shots rang from it in such quick succession that it were as though she held a battalion of musketeers in the palm of her lily white hand.

Skulls cracked, burst, exploded as round after round found their targets, ending lives briskly in a gristly cascade of metal, meat and bone.

And all the time, Anne Bonny was grinning.

The Black Diana **shuddered.**

The Captain clambered to his feet, his boots slipping on the blood-soaked deck. Bodies were strewn in twitching heaps in all directions. Porkbelly spied poor Spade-Faced Jake, slumped against a barrel, pathetically trying to scoop his own guts back inside his body; a challenging task as both his hands had been sliced off at the wrist.

The remaining crew were running for their lives, standing no chance against Bonny's unearthly weapons. Her impossible pistol continued to spray streams of leaden death as she danced across the deck in search of new targets.

Boatswain Begsie burst from below deck, screaming. He surveyed the scene that greeted him in terror, searching for the Captain. Spying Porkbelly, Begsie opened his mouth to call out, but the warning died in his throat. He vomited a gout of crimson and expired where he stood.

But, his body did not fall. Something held the fresh corpse upright. His eyeballs popped from his head like corks from a bottle. Blood fountained from the vacated sockets.

Something had followed Begsie from below.

A monstrous, coral-coloured tentacle had whipped itself around the boatswain's waist. As thick as the ship's mast and unfathomably long, the great limb had crushed him like a weevil between a thumb and forefinger. The huge tentacle lifted the lifeless carcass from the deck and casually tossed it into the sea.

Then the deck split in two.

More tentacles uncoiled. Pushing apart the planks. Snapping timbers like twigs. Where the monstrous arms found crewmen, they crushed them. They plucked men to pieces, dashed them into paste against the bulwark or hurled them, violently, into the ocean.

Porkbelly fell to his knees, crossing himself, crying out to the creator for salvation. He cried for deliverance from the demon-woman and her sea-monster.

When he saw the man rising from the bowels of the ship on the tip of a monster's tentacle, for a fleeting moment he thought his prayers had been answered.

But as the man stepped onto the broken deck, it was clear he was yet another devil.

His clothes were like Bonny's, unnaturally clean and fine. He too wore boots and britches with a high-collared naval jacket, studded with brilliant gold buttons. On his head he wore a tricorn with fine gold embroidery around the brim.

He was tall, noble-looking with a piercing gaze. But his face was painted, like a tribesmen from the Americas. A black stripe across his eyes, a white one across the bridge of his nose and red covering his mouth and chin, the man plucked a pistol from his belt, trained it on Porkbelly and stalked towards the cowering Captain.

"Stay where you are, Captain" said the man, casually. "You may live through this." The timbre of the man's voice carried an almost supernatural authority.

The Black Diana **tipped to port and began to sink in earnest.**

"Anne!" shouted the man, squinting through the gun-smoke, "Let's finish up here! The cargo is aboard!"

"Coming, my love!" called Bonny.

The sea-monster rose through the massive hole in the deck. Its great, beak-like maw gaped hungrily.

"Do not feed me to that thing, sir!" begged Porkbelly, tears streaming down his face, "I implore you!"

The man sighed as Bonny joined them. She slid her sword into its sheath and trained her pistol on the pleading Captain. "All your crew are dead, Captain Coker," she said brightly. "They all died screaming in confusion. They left this world as ignorant as when they arrived. Would you like the opportunity to understand what they could not?"

Porkbelly doubted that he truly wished to understand any of this, but praying that his complicity brought the end more swiftly, he nodded. Anne ushered him to his feet. She gestured to the mouth of the sea-monster.

"Step inside, Captain!" Bonny commanded.

The monster opened its mouth wider.

“Please, milady!” screamed Porkbelly.

“Oh for pity's sake!” sighed Bonny's unnamed companion and pushing Porkbelly to one side, he strolled into the beast's open mouth and disappeared.

Porkbelly turned to Bonny, incredulous and whispered, “Who... is *he*!?”

“That is the Hussar,” said Bonny, her eyes smouldering, “and this is our vessel, the Kraken. Step aboard, Captain. Unless you prefer to die here.”

Tentatively, Porkbelly put his left foot into the Kraken's mouth. Its tongue was soft, but rough enough to gain purchase. Urged on by Bonny's pistol, he edged further toward the gullet. The monster's breath was surprisingly sweet, stirring memories of the whorehouses and opium dens of Tangier. The great throat opened before him. Heady from the Kraken's breath, the stupefied pirate trudged inside. Bonny followed close behind.

The Kraken closed its maw, slid back between the broken timbers and into the ocean. It twisted through a number of esoteric planes onto a non-chronological trajectory and propelled itself into the ether.

With no one left as witness, *The Black Diana* slowly descended beneath the waves of the South Pacific, disappearing from view, and from history, forever.

Chapter Nine: Sea Change

"Re - Rogue Timeship (Familiar #09, aka. **'The Kraken'***)*

The pairing of Familiar #09 with Renegade Operative #1,003 does seem to have tempered the excesses of both parties. Whilst their preoccupations may be distasteful, we see no advantage to this House, or any other, in deploying resources to realign Familiar #09/Renegade Operative # 1,003 with protocol. Given the Homeworld's current campaign, such resources could be put to much better use elsewhere."

- *Memo from Lord Nybeckarlaxinthelle, House Lineacrux to Robert Scarratt, House Xianthellipse*

The Captain stood in a cathedral of flesh.

Arches of sinew stretched a hundred feet overhead, supporting a glistening ceiling of puce musculature. The floor-space of the creature's belly was at least three times the size of *the Black Diana***'s hold. At intervals, the meat of the floor was covered with the finest Egyptian carpet. The number of exquisite rugs alone would have commanded a king's ransom.**

But in the Kraken's belly, such riches were but a drop in an ocean of plunder.

There were chests over-flowing with doubloons, gold ingots stacked waist-high, jewellery and precious stones scattered across every extravagant surface. There were solid gold sarcophagi, gold statues, gem encrusted thrones and heaps of gaudily bejewelled paraphernalia, littering the red satin sheets of a great, gilded, four-poster bed that dominated the centre of these absurdly opulent surroundings.

Porkbelly gazed in awe.

The Hussar appeared from a side aperture. He was stripped to the waist, carrying a golden goblet in each hand. Bonny walked over to him, holstering her pistol. She ran a hand across the Hussars' heavily tattooed chest, before relieving him of one of the goblets and swigging the wine within. She turned to Porkbelly with a red smirk.

"Well, Captain?" she asked. "Do you see your haul amongst our

collection of treasures?"

Porkbelly nodded slowly, spotting many items from the *Diana* dotted throughout the loot.

"Why have you bought me here?" mumbled the pirate.

"The nature of our work requires a certain degree of subtlety," the Hussar explained.

With the gunsmoke of his crew's massacre still fresh in his nostrils, it was all Porkbelly could do to control a hysterical urge to laugh.

"Anne enjoys an... appreciative audience," her demon smouldered from behind his warpaint.

"*Appreciative*?" said Porkbelly. "What am I to *appreciate* in... this?"

"Why, *Piracy*, of course, my dear Captain!" laughed Bonny. "Surely, you can admire the superior piratical skills it took to best you and your men?"

Finally driven to the edge of his sanity, Porkbelly's steel returned in earnest.

"*Piracy*, milady!?" he hissed. "I witnessed no '*piracy*' today. What I have witnessed is naught but devilment! The work of sorcery! All hands lost to a...a...a maritime disaster... a pitiless maritime disaster disguised as a woman!"

Something flickered across Bonny's eyes.

The Hussar sipped his wine. "Anne," he muttered, "I tire of this ape."

Bonny took a step toward Porkbelly. "Oh, my Captain," she whispered, "I so *wished* you would understand. I see now that you are either unwilling or unable. No matter. I am one with history. I am legend incarnate. Now that I walk with gods, I do as gods do."

A dagger flashed. The Captain's belly opened. Its contents spilled onto the floor.

Bonny wafted the golden blade before Porkbelly's startled eyes.

“History has swallowed you, Captain Coker,” she proclaimed through gritted teeth, before plunging the dagger into his shoulder. The blow hammered Porkbelly to the floor, his knees splashing into the expanding puddle of his own blood. There, the pirate teetered, pain alone delaying his final, inevitable fall.

Anne Bonny sank her drink and tossed the empty goblet over her right shoulder. She tore off her shirt and flung it over her left. For a moment, she stood before the dying pirate in naked, monstrous perfection, then turned and leapt into the arms of the Hussar.

The pair toppled backwards onto the bed, just as Porkbelly slumped sideways to the floor. His cheek pressed against the bottom of the Kraken's belly. The touch of its surface roused forgotten memories of a childhood sheepdog's rasping tongue.

“Shep?” the Captain whimpered, soundlessly.

His view of the bed now askance and fading, the demons there copulated ferociously amongst the satin and gold. The Kraken's tendrils crept in from the edges of his vision, toward the couple, as if to join the salacious entanglement. Porkbelly closed his eyes before the tips of the sea-beast's tentacles made contact with the couple.

The pungent fragrance of Tangier. The lick of his faithful dog. The gentle caress of his cabin boy.

The pain ceased.

Captain James “Porkbelly” Coker left the stage.

Chapter Ten: Godmother Knows Best

"Come out of the twilight
And walk before us a while,
Friendly, with the light step
Of one whose mind is fully made up, terrible
To the terrible"

- *Poem To Antigone (B. Brecht, 1948)*

"Ah thowt we wez deein' masks, man?" barked Chantelle from behind her Pit-bull skull. She surveyed the scene in the upper gallery with great irritation.

Antigone was sat behind Chris's desk like she owned the place, pointedly not looking up from the papers in front of her as Chaz had entered. One of the Godmother's snivelling lackeys stood close by on her left.

Chris was sprawled on the chaise longue dressed in his comedy bishop outfit. Harry was crammed into a creaking armchair, arms and legs folded defiantly. His whirling eyes generated undiluted contempt.

"Chaz! Great! Come and have a seat!" called Chris, beckoning her over. "The Godmother is eager to start. You can lose the mask, if you like." He scooted along the chaise longue, making room for her.

Chaz plucked the dog-skull from her head and slumped next to Chris with the surly attitude of a dour teenager. "What's aal this aboot?" she moaned.

"Where have you been, Cousin?" asked Antigone, still not looking up from her papers.

"Oot," said Chaz.

"Official business," said the Godmother. A statement, not a question.

"Sorta," said Chaz with a shrug.

"Please *elaborate***, Cousin," Antigone went on, irritation creeping into her tone.**

“It's as I was explaining to you, before Chaz arrived,” said Chris, diplomatically butting-in when noticing the tell-tale curl in Chantelle's lip. “Chaz has - very kindly - been following up some leads on quite a sensitive situation. I think it best if *I* debrief her first, if it's all the same to you? Now, as all my staff are present, perhaps *you* might like to elaborate on that little insinuation you made earlier?”

Antigone looked up from her papers. “Insinuation?” she said, narrowing her eyes.

Father Christèmas smiled, lifted the silver sea chronometer that was hung on a chain around his neck and swung it back and forth like a stage hypnotist. “Something about, 'The 2nd Second', wasn't it?” he asked with theatrical foreboding.

Antigone hurled a dossier across the desk at Christèmas. He caught it awkwardly with his left hand, narrowly avoiding the document slapping him in the face. He cleared his throat and examined the papers.

“You recognise this document,” said Antigone.

Chris nodded, “I recognise the handwriting and the blood it is written in,” he admitted. “It's mine.”

“A formal request to approach the Posthuman Chance Coteries with a view to negotiating the acquisition of an artefact currently in their possession,” said the Godmother.

“Yes,” Christèmas agreed. “One of many such requests. As one might expect from the office of the Aquister Primate. Is my admin at fault, Godmother?”

“What can you tell me about this *particular* request, Father?” said Antigone.

“Well,” said Chris, scanning the document closely, as if searching for clues, “this *particular* request seems to have been denied. Disappointing, Godmother, but it happens. I am sure I shall learn to live with it.”

“What do you know about the Faction's relationship with the Chance Coteries?” asked the Godmother.

“There's quite a complicated series of treaties, I understand,” said Chris. “The Neam Treaty is the most significant one, if memory serves. Basically, we're not to interfere with the chronology of their defined area of space-time.”

“Indeed,” Antigone agreed, “Parliament even went as far as assisting the Chance Coteries with the construction of their temporal defences in order to prevent interference from any time-active participants.”

“They say that good fences make good neighbours,” Chris remarked.

“So, you see why I am confused as to why the Aquister Primate would make a request that Parliament would so obviously refuse,” Antigone underlined.

“Oh, I don't know,” said Christèmas, thoughtfully. “Demanding the impossible seems to cover our remit here, wouldn't you say Chantelle?”

Chaz rolled her eyes.

“What *is* 'The 2nd Second'?” asked Cousin Rupert.

All eyes turned to him, mainly because everyone had forgotten he was even present. There was an awkward silence.

Chris was first to break. “Has the Godmother not told you... errm... Sorry, what was your name again?”

Rupert stiffened, “I *know* what the artefact *is*, Father,” he lied brazenly, “I would like *you* to tell me... what you... *think* it is.”

Antigone sighed.

“Well,” said Christèmas, rubbing his chin in order to remove the smirk his face was cultivating, “As far we can tell, from the scraps of information we've amassed, the 2nd Second is a minor artefact from the early days of the Great Houses. It was left in the keeping of the Chance Coteries, long before their treaty with Parliament, presumably as collateral. Although, its value is purely symbolic, as far as we can tell.”

“Do I really need to be here?” mumbled Haribeaux.

Antigone ignored him and continued with her cross-examination. “So, not only was the request pointless,” she clarified, “but the artefact in question was entirely worthless.”

“Oh, I wouldn't go that far, Godmother,” said Christèmas, his professional pride smarting slightly. “As the curator of the Bankside collection, it seemed exactly our sort of thing. Sometimes these trinkets turn out to be more useful than they can first seem. Remember the Black Tooth of Big Nose Kate, Chaz?”

Chantelle grimaced and nodded with reluctance.

“Sometimes these things don't become useful until they are integrated into the collection.” Chris explained. “It's the juxtaposition with other pieces that inspires their potency. It’s an art as much as a science, Godmother.”

Antigone calculated Christèmas's sincerity and marked the result in her ledger.

“Just to clarify, Father,” the Godmother added, “Does the office of the Aquister Primate intend to take any further action toward securing the 2nd Second?”

Christèmas snorted, “Of course not, Godmother. Parliament have decreed otherwise.”

“That hasn't always stopped you in the past,” Antigone retorted.

“There were... mitigating circumstances on those... *particular* **occasions,” Christèmas insisted. “But, I can see this means a great deal to you, Godmother. So let me add my personal assurance that Bankside shall not be taking any further action toward securing the 2nd Second for the collection.”**

Chris sat back and gauged the Godmother's reaction. There had been a definite flicker, when he had referred to Antigone's personal feelings on this matter. That had got to her. He shared an imperceptible micro-glance with Chantelle. Clearly Chaz had spotted it too.

Antigone was on her feet. She began collecting her documents as

though preparing to leave. All those present shared confused glances, even Cousin Rupert.

"Cousin Rupert, you will begin the audit of the collection immediately," the Godmother commanded. "Cousin Haribeaux will assist."

"What!?" shrieked Harry, attempting to leap to his feet in outrage. But his massive frame was jammed so tight into the armchair, all he could manage was to flail his limbs in fury.

Rupert looked nervously at the apoplectic Haribeaux and then at Antigone. "Godmother...?" he entreated, "May I have a... private word?"

Antigone snorted in the affirmative and lead her subordinate over to the far side of the gallery, leaving Chris and Chaz to attempt to placate Harry and extricate him from the armchair's grasp.

"Are you... leaving...," Rupert almost said 'abandoning', "… me *here*, Godmother?" he whispered.

"I have things to attend to," replied Antigone, indulging the insolence of her protégé this once. "They won't give you any trouble. Make sure Haribeaux shows you the Blue Praxis experiments *first*. If he can't reproduce what his report claims, you may return to the Ministry with your findings."

"And if the experiment *is* successful?" said Rupert.

"In that unlikely eventuality, continue with the audit and catalogue all the relevant discrepancies before returning," the Godmother replied. She then turned and called for Christèmas and Chantelle to accompany her back to the boat.

Haribeaux was now vertical and Chris and Chaz seemed to have calmed the giant's mood, to a degree.

Godmother Antigone swept from the gallery with Father Christèmas jogging close behind. On her way out, Cousin Chantelle took a moment to administer a hearty pat of commiseration to the shoulder of Cousin Rupert and mutter the sincere advice, "Show ne fear, pet. Yee'll be fine, like," before disappearing into the corridor.

Rupert looked at Haribeaux.

Haribeaux glared at Rupert.

Chapter Eleven: The Next Time We Meet

"The so-called 'Ministry of Insinuation' was feared and loathed by all within Faction Paradox, but was just as equally respected (with one or two honourable exceptions).

Said to be the final arbiters of the Grandfather's will, any transgression of protocol would be judged by the Ministry on a case by case basis and summary punishment dispatched with ruthless ferocity.

The Ministry's jurisdiction was rarely bought into question. Awkward queries being, presumably the most serious breach of protocol imaginable."

- *Faction Paradox: A Negotiable History (S. Walmric, AF 189)*

In the lift down, no one spoke.

Godmother Antigone was allowing the silence to percolate.

Father Christèmas was fighting his innate urge to prattle on principle.

Cousin Chantelle was peeved that she had been dragged back from Pluto for no reason whatsoever.

This sudden surprise departure of the Godmother was clearly designed to unsettle. Antigone must have got what she came for. But what *had* she come for? thought Chris. Just to install her lackey to dig for dirt? To deliver a message that Bankside was in her crosshairs? She had certainly done both of those things. But that wasn't it.

There was something more to come.

He ached to provoke her with his typical line in inane banter, but knew that he must resist. Christèmas steeled himself, kept his poker face and waited for the Godmother to show her hand.

On the ground floor, the trio filed out and across to the main reception. The entrance was dark, dusty and musty from misuse. Chris gave Chaz the nod and she hurried ahead to draw back the rusted bolts and throw the heavy steel doors wide.

On the threshold, Antigone paused as if to take in the view. But the Godmother held no appreciation of such frivolous activities. She slid her owl mask onto her head and asked a question, "What are your plans?"

Chris and Chaz exchanged a glance.

"'Plans'?" said Chris, "Well, I suppose, we'll head to the Tanks, after we've seen you off, to observe Harry's experiment with... your man, whatsisname..."

"Faction Paradox has its origins in the oldest bloodlines in all creation," said Antigone, ignoring Christèmas's waffle. "Its rituals and protocols have been shared, freely, with the lesser species. The benefits of the bloodline's experience lift brief, mundane lives out of their vulgar preoccupations to a more profound cause. It can be frustrating when certain members of these species, instead of basking in their good fortune, attempt to promote their own, irrelevant agenda."

She turned her masked head to Chantelle, "I ask you, how can they hope to influence the processes of the Faction with such... *petty* ambition? It would be like trying to extinguish a star with one puff of breath, as though it were a candle, wouldn't you say, Cousin?"

Chantelle nodded, "Aye, Godmother. Muckle pointless, like."

Antigone turned away and stalked off, down the path, towards the pier.

"Teacher's pet," muttered Chris under his breath to Chaz before nipping off to catch up with the Godmother.

Chaz tutted and slowed her pace to a dawdle.

Christèmas caught up, matched Antigone's speed and mimicked her gait. When he spoke it was in a tone more considered than he had yet used during their entire meeting.

"Do you think I don't take my duties as seriously as you, Godmother?" he asked, rhetorically. "My office, by definition, will always be at odds with the Ministry of Insinuation. Surely you must concede that at least?"

"I concede nothing," replied the Godmother levelly.

“So, we are unable to agree to disagree?” asked Chris. There was a waft of ultimatum in the question.

“You over-estimate your significance, Father,” Antigone sneered. “The Ministry works in the Grandfather's absence. Bankside is... at best... a refuse collection service.”

“At least I am not *afraid* to get my hands dirty,” Christèmas retorted, “Not like you *or* your precious Grandfather.”

“Oh, so it's blasphemy now, is it, Father?” she hissed from behind her owl-mask. “You are stultifying in your predictability...”

But Chris was on a roll now. He couldn't be stopped. He cut her short and continued. “So, Grandfather Paradox does a runner from the Great Houses, sets up his own little franchise in the *real* world. Starts going native, recruiting from the 'lesser' species. Ooh, isn't he all *bohemian*? Won't the other Great Houses be *scandalised*? What a fucking *rebel*! Nothing can stop *this* free spirit! So, then what does he do? Erases himself from history! Instead of making any real difference, he settles for being the mysterious ponce for all eternity!”

Antigone spun and pointed a finger of pure condemnation into Christèmas's mocking face. “You give yourself away, Father,” she growled. “A vulgar understanding of events beyond the means of your biology to truly comprehend. Part of the Ministry's remit is to *re-educate*. You cannot see it, but Bankside needs to be *taught*. You will thank us when you finally become aware of your standing.”

They were at the pier. Kharon was waiting. Chantelle finally caught them up.

“Cousin Chantelle,” said the Godmother, not shifting her gaze from Christèmas, “Remember the Ministry's door is always open to you.”

“Aye?” said Chaz, nonplussed.

Chris smiled at the Godmother. “Are you familiar with the work of Frankie Howerd at all, Antigone?” he asked, a hint of mischief returning to his tone. “Of course not. Lesser species. What was I thinking?” He turned to Chantelle, “What about you, Chaz?”

“Eh?” said Chaz.

“Frankie Howerd,” said Chris. “He's from around your period. You know? 'Ooh, err, missus!'?”

Chaz pulled a cynical face and shook her head.

“Philistine,” sighed Chris and proceeded to educate the pair of them. “Frankie Howerd was a comedian. A very good one. His act was a glorious, rambling affair. Off the cuff remarks, innuendo, trains of thought getting side-tracked. “Ooohs” and “Ahhs” and “Don't start me off”s. A very quick, very funny man.

“Now, the thing about Frankie Howerd was this: although his act seemed chaotic, it was far from it. His words were *laboriously* planned. Every “Ooh” was scripted. Every “Ahh” preordained. To the world he seemed free-wheeling, his act a work of pure instinct. But to *appear* that way took a scrupulous discipline and attention to detail.”

“Is this metaphor meant to illustrate something significant, Father?” murmured the Godmother, “Do you see yourself as this 'Frankie Howerd'?”

Chris paused. For a second he seemed genuinely perplexed, “Godmother, you are always the first draw attention to my singular lack of discipline,” he remarked. “That's not what I was getting at at all.” He glanced at Chaz for support, but her expression displayed a similar level of bemusement.

“Oh, never mind,” said Christèmas with a shrug, and guided the Godmother towards the boat. Antigone boarded with a nod to the ferryman to cast off.

As Cousin Kharon pushed the punt westwards, Chris called out, and with a consolatory gesture, said, “I hope next time we meet, it can perhaps be on more informal terms?”

Godmother Antigone remained silent and stared straight ahead.

“Oh, please yourself,” muttered Father Christèmas, as the boat slid quietly into the fog and disappeared from view.

Chapter Twelve: The Girl Who Has Everything

"'I am lucky to make it back home, to my own time, I suppose," Jane admits, "There's other people still out there. But, what you have to understand is that these... aliens. They need us. They come from a place where they are cut-off from the real world. They've been cut-off for so long, they've forgotten all the things that we take for granted.

'They've become so caught up in this war and stuff that they've lost touch with all the... **human** *things, like friendship and love... and sex and all that sort of stuff. It's sad really.'*

Whether you believe all the details of Jane's story or not, it's great that she has come through her experience and kept a positive attitude. ('Jane' is using an assumed name to protect her identity)"

- *'I Was Abducted By A Time-Travelling Sex Pest' (Chinwagz Magazine #3442, Nov 2011)*

Anne Bonny was rudely awakened by a sharp pain to her shoulder blade.

She had rolled over in her sleep and landed on one of the pointy, precious stones that littered the bed. Scrabbling awkwardly behind herself, she removed the offending treasure and hurled it, unceremoniously across the other side of the room. The priceless whatever-it-was crashed into a pile of other, unidentified but highly-valuable items, which in turn clattered, noisily, to the floor.

Angry at the injustice of her sleep being disturbed in such a way, Anne flicked open her eyes, searching for someone to blame.

She was surprised and annoyed to find herself alone. The Hussar was nowhere to be seen. She puffed out her cheeks with irritation. Then, remembering how she had left Captain Coker bleeding on the floor, she rolled across the bed to check if there was any remaining life in the old fool, which she might spice up with a touch more torment.

Alas, the Captain had long since departed and Anne had slept for so long, that the Kraken had almost entirely absorbed the dead pirate's remains. All that was now left of poor Porkbelly was a pile of dirty clothes and a fading red patch on the floor.

Disappointed, Anne sat up pouting.

She surveyed the treasures that surrounded her. The degree of wealth and opulence on display was preposterous. The haul just got bigger every day - although, that said, what *was* a day to a ship of time?

As each new item was added to the pile, every expensive bauble only served as yet another, glittering reminder of all the things she did *not* own. Bonny nursed her dissatisfaction with vehemence.

She called to the Kraken as to the Hussar's whereabouts. The lack of response confirmed her suspicions and spurned her into action. She sprang from the bed, whipped the satin sheet from it and wrapped it around her naked body. Then, furiously kicking a path through a mountain of gold coins, Anne stalked off towards the bridge.

The corridor to the Kraken's control room was a snaking pipe of ribbed gristle that curled and coiled into a vertiginous spiral. Anne was now so used to the Kraken's interior dimensions that the existential terror she had fought on her initial introduction to the timeship's innards was now but a distant memory.

She barely remembered how she had passed out at the first sight of the ship's bridge.

The control room was an ovoid cavity of colossal proportions. Here, the pipe-like corridors became troughed bridges, leading to the centre of the immense space. There, suspended by fleshy tendrils and a web-like structures of tendons, was a full-sized, Spanish galleon. The ship's sails were missing and the ropes of the rigging had become so intertwined with the Kraken's own vein-like extrusions that it was impossible to tell where sailing ship ended and timeship began.

The space surrounding the galleon supported its own microclimate and wispy clouds of vapour curled around the suspended vessel in a shifting, iridescent halo. Passing through these clouds and inadvertently catching a lungful of their contents could have disorientating side effects. The clouds contained processes to some of the Kraken's more esoteric temporal systems and Anne had learned through bitter experience that when passing through the vapour, it was best to hold one's breath.

As she got closer, she could see the Hussar standing at the ship's wheel. She called to him, but received no response. Infuriated, Anne ran the last few yards and vaulted onto the galleon's lower deck. Then, scooping up her satin sheet like petticoats, she dashed up the steps to the upper deck and found her suspicions realised.

The Hussar was naked and tied to the ship's wheel by the Kraken's tentacles. A number of the timeship's muculent limbs bound him, hand and foot, whilst others palpated and explored the rest of his tattooed body. Oblivious to Anne's approach, the Hussar stared, drunkenly, into a monstrous, milky eyeball, three times the size of a human head. The Kraken's eye dangled before his face like some great, glistening and pendulous bollock.

Anne sprinted up behind the Hussar and delivered a ferocious slap to his naked arse, leaving a mark as livid as her mood. Their coital trance broken, the Hussar and the Kraken's great eye turned, woozily to meet Anne's gaze.

"You've smudged your war paint, dearest," Bonny sneered.

"I thought you were sleeping, my love," the Hussar slurred.

"That much is obvious."

The tendrils binding the Hussar to the wheel instantly retracted with a wet flutter. The great eye blinked once before twanging itself upwards, into the vastness of the Kraken's interior.

"I don't understand why you always react like this when I interface with the Kraken," he sighed, reaching out to her. She begrudgingly accepted his embrace.

"I don't like it when you sneak off together," she grumbled, "Without *me*."

"You know that I don't need as much sleep as you," he placated her, stroking her glowering face, "And the Kraken needs none at all. There was interesting news. We've have located the last of the *Ganj-I-Sawai* haul."

"Already?" said Bonny. "We've only just secured the last lot. It usually takes much longer than that..."

“I know, but we are in luck,” said the Hussar, kissing her neck. “Your greatest triumph is almost at hand, my love!”

“Yes,” said Bonny.

The imminence of this completion filled her with unease. What next? She never realised at the start, that commanding the devotion of an elemental libertine with infinite, arcane powers at his disposal would ever end up so... monotonous.

She grabbed a handful of his hair and tugged his head roughly to one side. “How long have we got?” she purred.

“As long as your ladyship requires,” he answered, obediently.

She grabbed his shoulder with her other hand, dropping her sheet and digging in her nails deep enough to draw blood. He winced and smiled.

“You are mine to command,” she whispered.

“Always,” he sighed.

Chapter Thirteen: The Girl Who Has Everything To Lose

“From a classic human perspective, the cymbiont is probably the most agreeable of the technosapien subspecies and not purely for superficial reasons. Yes, they do tend to look more classically human than most of the other groups. But, it is in their social connectivity that their appeal truly lies.

With the amount of airtime and column inches devoted to various military campaigns of technosapien marauders, it is often assumed that technosapience itself must always lead to some form of strict, anti-emotion doctrine. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The emotional relationship between biological and technological cymbionts is deep and complex. The two personalities 'overlap' creating cognitive connections on a fundamental level - in some isolated cases, it has even been known for a third, distinct personality to arise from the overlapping of the two.

'Emotion connectivity' is of far greater significance to the development of the technosapien species than 'emotional erasure'. Although, as emotional connectivity rarely leads to violent military campaigns, it is perhaps understandable how this fact often fails to make the news.”

- *Technosapience: An Introduction (Dr M Banks, 50^9 7029)*

Sojourner sat, in conference, inside L-Event.

She wore a golden ball gown. Her impractical shoes were kicked off and a flute of champagne was perched, untouched, on the control panel in front of her. She held her head in her hands, while elsewhere, her entire civilization celebrated.

Sojourner had told L-Event everything.

It had happened on several levels at once. She had spoken, confessed it all, out loud. Not the most efficient means of transferring data, but Sojourner had found this the most cathartic method. She had simultaneously reclassified the files in her subconscious from 'dream scenarios' back to the actual events of her past-life as Cousin Ceol and at the same time, declassified memories of her recent meeting with Chantelle.

Data poured into L-Event.

The new information took a while to assimilate and the mammoth had to reboot several of its systems in order to deal with the changes. Sojourner felt the twinges of disappointment emanate from Ellie when integrating the new data. This was swiftly followed by a wave of bolstering positivity, as the mammoth came to terms with the new situation and adjusted the parameters accordingly.

In seven seconds, L-Event was fully up to speed and calculating options.

Sojourner's verbal confession took slightly longer to complete, but the mammoth waited patiently for her Lady President to do so.

“I am sorry, Ellie,” said Sojourner, shamefully. “I shouldn't have deceived you.”

“I understand,” said the mammoth.

This was true.

Informing her closest friend of her life-long deception had been strangely anti-climactic in the end. Although, that was probably the point. L-Event wasn’t her ‘friend’. The term did not begin to cover the extent of their relationship. That said, neither was the robot-mammoth the love of her life: that position was occupied by Rex, her husband and her rock. Her daughter and her granddaughter occupied her affections fundamentally. A cymbiont relationship functioned on a different vector.

L-Event was a technological extension of Sojourner herself, just as she was a biological extension of Ellie. Sojourner often thought of themselves as twins, but even that approximation was misleading.

The relative simplicity with which L-Event incorporated Sojourner's previous life as 'Cousin Ceol' really brought it home how deceiving Ellie all this time had actually been far more about deceiving herself.

She wondered if having this previous life was what sometimes prevented her from seeing cymbiont relationships for what they truly were.

And as Sojourner wondered, L-Event wondered too.

“I've been an idiot,” said the Lady President.

“Yes,” the elephant concurred.

“No wonder I went to pieces when Chantelle was here,” she continued, angry with herself, “Fancy disconnecting myself from you! I'm a moron!”

“It was an unwise course of action,” Ellie agreed.

“So, what do we do?” asked Sojourner, already far too aware of the answer.

For appearances sake, L-Event ran the data one more time.

“We wait for the message from Chantelle,” said Ellie.

“And then?”

“We find out exactly what she wants us to do.”

Sojourner sighed.

They both knew that, whatever Chantelle wanted them to do, they were more than likely going to have to do it.

“We will only be able to mitigate the outcomes when in possession of all the details,” said L-Event.

“We can't just do nothing!” snapped Sojourner, “What about Scacia De Rein? What do we know about her? What could she possibly have that the Faction could want?”

A buzz interrupted them.

Rex was calling. Sojourner winced and asked Ellie to patch him through.

“How long you going to be, babe?” asked the tiny hologram of her husband. “Anami is going to bed and she wants a kiss from her grandma.”

“Sorry, honey,” said Sojourner. “Not much longer. You know how it is, 'Love me...'“

“'Love my giant mechanical elephant,'“ Rex added - an often repeated phrase in the Hooper-Agogô household.

“Five minutes,” said Rex before disconnecting.

Sojourner sat up, slipped on her shoes, and asked Ellie for a quick info-blitz.

L-Event trawled the web and accessed all the information they could find about the Chance Coteries, Serendipity Keep and De Rein herself. The majority of what they found added nothing to what they already knew.

The Chance Coteries were a system of worlds ruled by a number of oligarchs. They pursued the accumulation of material wealth to the exclusion of all else. The generation of the majority of this wealth came from gambling. Games of chance were seen as sacred and the Coterie's highest church was Serendipity Keep.

Scacia De Rein's ancestors had founded the Keep five hundred years ago and, as the incumbent Indeterminatrix, she had amassed more wealth than that of her entire ancestral bloodline combined. She was shrewd, ruthless and creative. She was also a cymbiont.

“She's a cymbiont!?” yelped Sojourner, incredulously.

“Yes,” said Ellie, “I didn't expect that.”

“But, the Chance Coteries still have slaves, don't they?” said Sojourner.

“Yes,” said Ellie, “They usually refer to them as 'debtors' though. They are not exclusively cymbionts either. There seems to have been a spate of influential Coterie members adopting cybernetic-symbiosis as some sort of cultural affectation.”

Sojourner considered the idea of someone becoming a cymbiont as a fashion statement. Initially, it seemed bizarre to her. As she did this, L-Event plucked the history and development of denim jeans from the web and added it to Sojourner's considerations. She smiled at the parallel the mammoth was drawing, using a twenty-first century reference no less, in honour of Sojourner's recently revealed past-life.

Denim jeans had been invented on Earth as cheap, durable working

clothes for miners and cowboys at the end of the nineteenth century. By the end of the following century, it would not be unusual to find fashion models parading up and down catwalks in designer jeans, made purely as luxury, aspirational items of dress.

It seemed that the Chance Coteries were affecting their own, post-human equivalent.

They examined images and footage of the Indeterminatrix alongside her stylish, cybernetic familiar.

De Rein was tall, with pale, silvery skin. Her heart-shaped face was framed with a mane of white-blonde hair. Almond-shaped eyes glittered with strategically enhanced home-spun charm and her abnormally perfect smile was offered freely in every publicity shot. From her flawless skin, hour-glass figure and absurdly enhanced chest, she radiated the aura of quasi-youth displayed only by the very old and very rich.

It took a while to notice her cymbiont familiar. De Rein had named it 'Teardrop'.

Teardrop was an amorphous blob of gold that could alter its entire shape at will. De Rein usually wore it as a piece of flamboyant clothing or as an ostentatious hat, turban or wig. But, sometimes, Teardrop appeared perched on her shoulder or sat in her lap and De Rein would be seen stroking the mercurial mass as an over-indulged pet.

"Do you notice anything about all these different shots of her?" asked Sojourner.

"No security guards," replied L-Event.

"Clearly, Teardrop has some hidden defensive capabilities," said the Lady President.

They paused for a moment as an incoming message sidled its way across L-Event's communication array. Its point of origin was impossible to discern, but it was obvious from whom it came.

The message merely contained a date and a location.

"It's on," said L-Event.

Sojourner immediately downed her glass of champagne and stormed off, in search of another.

Act II - Know Your Role

Chapter Fourteen: The Mark

"All are born in Chance,

We bow where the cards fall,

The stake is sacred, The profit is holy,

All are born in Chance"

- *The Prayer of Serendipity Keep (traditional)*

From a distance, it looked like a soap-bubble, floating on the chill morning air.

The rising sun reflected across the bubble's surface, splitting the light and sending glittering shards of colour swirling in haphazard directions. Propelled gently by the breeze, the bubble revolved slowly, rising and falling to the whim of the current, its true nature only revealed as it drifted closer to the ground.

The bubble was a sphere the size of a castle, constructed from hundreds of tonnes of marble and stained glass. The technology that allowed this massive object to waft, idly across the heavens was as discreet as it was complex. Above all else, it was very, very expensive to maintain.

And ultimately, that was the point.

This was the private residence of Coruscacia De Rein.

The sphere spiralled downwards, circling in lazy loops around Serendipity Keep. The Keep jutted arrogantly from the desert surface, defying the unforgiving landscape of the planet, whose name had long since been forgotten. A city-sized, hexagonal pyramid of pale stone and coloured glass, the Keep was a monstrous temple of excess.

As the sphere glided around the Keep, the sun crept through the window of master bedroom, adding a shimmer to the golden sheet that covered the vast, circular bed.

Beneath the sheet, Scacia was sleeping. She stirred at the gentle request of the Keep's artificial intelligence. There was something that

required her attention. Scacia sat up and stretched.

"What's the problem, honey?" she asked the AI, sleepily.

"The Thane of Finiphec has exhausted his line of credit and requests a further extension," said Nonchalance. The voice of the AI possessed a reassuring, dark-brown timbre that emanated from no discernible direction.

"Hasn't he gone to bed yet?" chuckled Scacia, "Well, honey. You tell the Thane I am on my way down. Invite him and his retinue to breakfast with me, would you please?"

"The Thane is refusing to leave the cartomancer's chamber until he speaks to you personally, Scacia," Nonchalance explained.

Scacia rubbed her eyes and tutted.

"Darn that Thane," she muttered, "Which chamber is he in, darlin'?"

"He's been in the Sequential Cloisters all night," said Nonchalance.

"Oh, well, there's plenty of room in the Cloisters, isn't there?" chirped Scacia, "You can set breakfast there. I'll be down in twenty minutes. Just gonna get a shower."

"Which breakfast should we serve, ma'am?" asked Nonchalance.

"Oh, *the Dignitary*, **of course, honey," insisted Scacia with a grin. "We owe the Thane** *that* **at least. Even if he owes the Keep everything else!"**

"Understood," said the AI and forwarded De Rein's instructions to the various relevant departments.

Scacia flipped the gold sheet from the bed and skipped across the carpet, towards the en-suite.

Before the sheet settled on the floor, it transformed itself into a chromium butterfly and fluttered after Scacia, into the bathroom.

"Ten more sleeps," hummed the butterfly.

"Ten more sleeps, Teardrop honey," Scacia replied, stepping into

the shower. “But, it looks like the Thane of Finiphec has started his own celebrations a little *too* early.”

The sphere circled the Keep one more time for luck, then eased itself into a cup-like docking bay in the upper-east facet of the pyramid. There was a gentle rumble and the clack of stone meeting stone as the great sphere came to rest.

De Rein had already completed her ablutions as the connecting door slid open. She was dressed in Teardrop, who had taken the form of a smart but casual trouser suit, with luxurious cuffs and collar and an airily plunging neckline. Scacia entered the Keep, her heels clicking against the marble floor with a deceptively languid purpose.

She was met by a Claviger, who bowed as low as his ceremonial plate-mail would allow. Scacia's late grandmother had always said that the Keep's armoured doormen looked like 'lobsters wearing wimples' and the memory provided an extra-wide smile from the Indeterminatrix, whenever she greeted one of their number.

“Good morning, ma'am,” boomed the Claviger.

“Morning, honey,” beamed Scacia, “Anything to report this morning?”

“All is quiet, ma'am,” the Claviger replied. “Although, my shift has only *just* begun.”

“I haven't even had breakfast yet,” said Scacia. “I'm sure things will get a little more interesting soon!”

With a wave and a grin, Scacia De Rein headed off to her appointment.

The Claviger stood to attention and waited.

Chapter Fifteen: Breakfast of Champions

“The Devoted have already begun to arrive for the Serendipity Keep Quincentennial Celebrations, ten days before the official start. Kings, queens, oligarchs and celebrities are expecting to offer eye-watering stakes in the hope of gaining the favour of Chance itself.

Kismeticians are predicting an unprecedented level of opportunity, known as a 'contingency convergence', due to the significance of the date. If you are devoting anything to the celebrations, we'd like to wish you luck, but it looks as though there will already be plenty to go around!”

- *Telepress Web, Editorial Comment (13th Rein, 50^9 7043)*

The Sequential Cloisters were vast, seemingly endless corridors, lined with rows of ornately carved stone alcoves. Each alcove was lit by subdued candlelight and housed a cartomancer in full cloaked and hooded regalia. Each cartomancer sat on their own, personal, high-backed throne and in front of a semi-circular card table. On the back of each throne perched a tally-bird.

No currency changed hands in the cloisters. Instead, it was the job of the tally-bird to keep account of the winnings and losses of every devotee at a particular cartomancer's table. The birds were cybernetic and varied wildly in shape, some resembling parrots, others more raven-like, a few flittered like humming birds.

The devotees were quite thin on the ground on this particular morning. The number that were present were mostly stragglers from the night before.

De Rein located the Thane, sat at a banqueting table set for eight. Given the opulence of the feast on offer, there was nothing to suggest the haste in which the setting had been constructed. Three waiting staff dished out pancakes, fried meat, coffee and exotic fruit, whilst a Claviger stood guard at a temporary barrier of silken rope, cordoning off the area directly in front of the specific cartomancer's alcove.

Scacia beamed at the Thane as she approached. He raised his well-nursed wine goblet in greeting, struggling to reacquire some of the composure lost to the previous night’s revelry.

The Thane of Finiphec had cut quite a dash in his youth. Now, the rigours of a life committed to indulgence had taken their toll. His thinning hair was grey and mussed and his moustache flecked with debris. His gold chain and velvet cloak of office were similarly askew and tarnished.

The Thane tried his best to smoulder as Scacia took her place at the head of the table, but the attempt was now made through a sallow, hang-dog face. De Rein, ever the perfect hostess, reciprocated his gaze with a minor, vaguely patronising twinkle.

"Good morning, Thane," she said and glanced at his entourage, standing expectantly at few feet away from the table. "Your retinue will not be joining us?" she asked.

"They will wait until I have sated myself," slurred the Thane. "It is our custom."

"Of course," said Scacia, nodding for the waitress to pour her coffee. "Now, what may I do for you?"

"You can speak to your impudent staff and honour my devotion," grumbled the Thane.

"The Keep has already extended an extremely generous line of credit," said Scacia. "How much more do you feel you need to devote?"

"I merely require the hand I have been dealt to be covered," the Thane explained. "My profit will offset everything I already owe!"

The Indeterminatrix sighed.

She glanced over at the card table where the Thane's last hand of cards were sitting, face down before the silent, impassive cartomancer. Scacia beckoned over the relevant tally-bird, a silver wren, which fluttered to her shoulder, then whispered into her ear.

De Rein's face hardened as the bird relayed the extent of the Thane's devotion.

"Thane," said De Rein, her tone now entirely business, "you need to reconsider. You put the Keep in a very difficult position."

"I will offer *any* collateral you demand," boomed the Thane. "Name

it!"

"I think it would be wise for you to think again," stated De Rein, emphatically. "The collateral required to cover any further devotion is too great. Please, stay for the duration of the festivities as my personal guest. The Keep is grateful for your devotion."

"You are embarrassing me," growled the Thane.

"That was not my intention," said Scacia.

"Name your price!" hissed the Thane.

"The Keep would need all of it," said De Rein, levelly.

"My entire fortune?" laughed the Thane.

"Your entire culture," said De Rein. "Everything. Everyone."

The Thane of Finiphec stopped laughing.

Chapter Sixteen: Look At What You Could Have Won

"The ambassadors from Faction Paradox understood that what they represented to the coteries was an affront to the very concept of chance. This being the case, they had been very surprised when Serendipity Keep had requested an audience in the first instance.

Once the Keep had outlined the nature of the envisioned treaty, the Faction saw that there was far more common ground than had previously been realised and were eager to discuss the proposals in greater detail."

- *From the minutes of the preliminary meeting, The Neam Treaty (8th Daye, 50^9 6543)*

He had heard of others who had claimed to have made 'The Final Devotion' and prospered.

He had also heard of entire empires, dismantled at the hands of the Keep's liquidation fleets.

He had never completely believed the stories until this moment.

The Thane of Finiphec stared, unblinking across the breakfast table at Scacia De Rein.

She had made her offer and was now enjoying her meal, shovelling forkfuls of cured meat and pancakes into her grinning mouth, sipping coffee, chatting and joking with the waiting staff.

A knot tightened in the Thane's stomach. This was it. He realised now that his life had not been about purposeless indulgence at all, despite what his late parents had always said. It was all leading to this moment.

A moment to either walk away from the edge, from this self-serving existence and return to Finiphec and become the inspiration to his people he should always have been. Or to have the courage of his convictions and risk it all on the turn of a card. To trust everything to chance.

He swallowed and felt a fire ignite in his heart.

"I accept," announced the Thane.

The Indeterminatrix looked up from her meal and raised her eyebrows. “All or nothing?” she asked.

The Thane nodded and clambered to his feet. He staggered back to the card table and turned over his waiting hand. He made his spread, an inverted Fearmonger crossed with the Seventeen of Quills, followed by a flush - the three, nine and eleven of Parallelograms, finishing with an inverted Queen of Fish crossed with the Pertinence Tree.

An unbeatable spread. He was right to risk it all.

The Thane smiled and nodded to the cartomancer.

The cartomancer dealt three cards from the deck and invited the Thane to choose. The Thane chose the middle card. He turned and lifted the card up to his face.

The Thane saw his own face staring back in horror.

The mirror card.

He dropped it onto his spread as the world fell away beneath him.

The cartomancer scooped up the Thane's spread, restacked the deck and shuffled the cards.

The tally-bird chirped once.

It was over.

The Thane paused, then rose slowly and turned back to Scacia, who was still enjoying her breakfast. He took one step towards her before his legs gave out. His retinue, oblivious to the calamity that had befallen them all, stepped forward to assist their Thane, but he shook them off, commanding them to fall back. They hovered a few feet away as the Thane crawled on his hands and knees to Scacia, placing an entreating hand on her arm.

“Please,” hissed the Thane, “They will kill me when they hear what I have done.”

Scacia eyed the confused retinue. “They may well do that, Thane,” Scacia agreed. “What would you like me to do about it?”

“Protect me,” he pleaded.

“You realise that you will become the property of the Keep, don't you, honey?” scolded Scacia, her tone now that of an indulgent kindergarten teacher.

“Yes,” hissed the Thane.

“I am not sure what we could find to occupy you,” she wondered. “You can bet that it won't be much fun though, can't you? Are you sure you want to do this?”

“I... don't want to die,” muttered the Thane.

“OK,” she said. “I suppose you want me to give your people the bad news too, huh?”

The Thane cast his eyes downward.

Scacia sighed. She called over the waiting Claviger. “Take the Thane here to the Debt Verger,” she whispered. “He'll need sobering up and whipping into shape. Explain that he's old money, so won't be very practical. I am sure, with a little coaxing, we'll find some sort of use for him.”

The Claviger nodded and frog-marched the Thane away.

The rest of the Finiphec entourage went to follow, but Scacia interceded, smiling, reassuring and bidding them all relax and to sit and eat. With some minor reluctance, the six members of the retinue took their seats. Tentatively, they drank and ate with Scacia and eventually they were put at their ease.

“Now,” said Scacia, once everyone had had their fill of breakfast. “There is something that I need to explain to you all. Unfortunately, your Thane decided to offer the entire Finiphec culture for devotion and Serendipity Keep is now the owner of all your planets, people and every asset in their name.”

There were gasps, tears, pleading and curses from various members of the retinue. Scacia gently placated them, bidding them to hush.

“I know,” she reassured them. “This will seem a little scary right now. We have already taken ownership of the Thane himself, purely for his own protection. Please, rest assured that Finiphec will be liquidated in as sensitive a manner as is possible. It will be a proud

send off to a truly noble dynasty. Please, try not to worry about any of that until after the celebrations. You are all my own, personal guests until then. Try to enjoy yourself...”

A Finiphec chancellor was on his feet. He grabbed a knife from the table and seized Scacia from behind, holding the blade to her throat.

“You will not enslave my people!” shrieked the chancellor, mad with panic. “Whatever the Thane has done, he has no *right*! We are not *assets*! You will renounce any claim to the Finiphec people!”

No one noticed the thread that unfurled itself from Scacia's collar as the chancellor made his demand. Invisibly, the golden strand lassoed the wrist of the chancellor's hand in which the knife was clasped.

“I can understand that you are upset,” said Scacia, gently. “If you calm down and let me go, we'll say no more about this, honey.”

“Renounce your claim!” yelled the chancellor.

The chancellor's hand fell off.

The knife clattered onto the table.

The chancellor held up the stump and examined it, incredulously. Four whole seconds passed before the stump began to fountain blood, accompanied by the chancellor's wail of horror and confusion.

Then, golden threads unspooled from all over Scacia's suit, flowing behind her, totally enmeshing the shrieking attacker in a net of fine wire. The Indeterminatrix looked around the table, at the rest of the dumbstruck entourage, making sure that all were paying close attention.

Then Teardrop tightened.

The chancellor stopped screaming as his body rained to the floor in neat, wet chunks.

Teardrop retracted, simultaneously absorbing any stray splashes of blood that had found their way onto Scacia. The Indeterminatrix dabbed the corner of her mouth with a napkin and stood up to leave.

“As I was saying,” she added to the now silent entourage, “please,

try to enjoy yourselves. The Keep shall retrieve the remaining assets only *after* the celebrations. We sincerely thank you for your patience and hope you manage to have as nice a time as possible!"

As she turned to leave, Scacia mouthed 'sorry' to the waiting staff, pointing to the bloody mound of cubed meat, piled behind her chair.

Then she stalked away, into the cloisters.

Chapter Seventeen: Harry's Kitchen

"Between two crimson fevers. I'll dethrone
The empty skeleton, and be thy death,
A death of grinding madness. Fear me now;
I am a devil, not a human soul"

- *The Last Man (T. Lovell Beddoes, 1803-1846)*

Cousin Rupert had lost Haribeaux.

Harry had stormed off ahead, down the stairwell, presumably towards the Turbine Hall. Rupert didn't know exactly where he was headed, but was able to follow the trail of sticky, elephantine foot prints which Haribeaux left in his wake.

Rupert reached the bottom of the stairs and found himself back in Harry's monstrous kitchen. Massive, diabolical machines in their flaking, multi-coloured livery, clanked and pumped out dank, sickly clouds of fumes. Haribeaux was nowhere to be seen, but was undoubtedly lurking somewhere in the shadows.

Rupert adjusted the optics on his mask and sure enough, Haribeaux became visible at the far side of the Hall, pulling levers and twisting dials in earnest.

As Rupert joined Haribeaux, he found him turning a huge, brass wheel, set into the floor. There was the hiss of a valve releasing and a great, circular, metal trapdoor slowly creaked open. Beneath, red lights revealed a metal ladder leading down.

"I... thought we might examine your Blue Praxis findings first," said Rupert, mustering as much authority as he was able.

"Obviously," murmured Harry. "Where do you think I'm taking you?"

"But, I thought this was your laboratory," said Rupert, gesturing around the Turbine Hall.

"Not for the Blue Praxis work!" snorted Haribeaux. "We converted the Tanks into a couple of nested pocket universes to prevent contamination. Come on."

Harry swung his massive frame onto the ladder and began to descend.

Rupert followed.

They climbed down a long, metal tunnel for several minutes, the trapdoor above them receding to a pinprick in the distance. At the bottom, Harry released the wheel on another great metal door. They stepped through into a small airlock chamber. Harry sealed the door behind them, then went to release the other that lay ahead. Before he did so, he turned to Rupert.

"This is quite important," he said, his weird, distorted voice seemingly expressing something approaching concern. "The universe we are about to enter was designed as a buffer zone. A sort of decontamination area. To make the most of its effect, try to be especially mindful of...well... *everything*. Study the way the place looks, the sounds, the smells. Let it saturate your senses. Soak it all into your perception. The imprint of the environment acts as a filter. The better the imprint, the higher the chance of a successful experiment. Understand?"

Rupert just nodded. He had been taken aback by Harry's abnormal turn of phrase. It had bordered on the poetic. Up until now, Haribeaux had only expressed himself in terms of anger, disgust or exasperation. Perhaps there was more to his monstrous cousin than had first met the eye?

They stepped through the door.

Rupert braced himself for an assault on his senses, but was surprised and somewhat relieved to find the vista that confronted him to be nothing of the sort.

They were outside, in a grey, uneven scrubland. It was bleak, overcast and desolate. Gravel crunched under Rupert's boots and a light breeze wafted his cloak.

He slid off his mask to feel the wind against his skin and inhaled deeply. The cold air was damp with mossy, autumnal aromas. The wind was the only sound.

Harry watched Rupert taking it all in as he sealed the door behind

them. Then, he turned and stomped off across the rough ground, towards a rocky ridge, protruding from the horizon. Rupert hung back for a moment, watching Haribeaux's advance.

In this environment, Harry's gaudy silhouette was truly freakish and entirely incongruous. It was hard to imagine where a figure whose head was a sparkling, blue skull, suspended in violent-orange aspic, shaped like the head of a bear and dressed in candy-striped plate-armour, would be anything *but* incongruous. But, here, in this dreary patch of unremarkable countryside, the effect was tenfold.

Rupert remembered Harry's instructions, to study everything around him carefully. In this task, the weirdness of Haribeaux's appearance was useful. It underlined just how unremarkable the surroundings were.

And then it struck Rupert how rarely he left the Eleven Day Empire these days. The mundane world of his birth would appear an anathema to his ascended self. He was so disconnected from the commonplace that, in many ways, what he may have once deemed mundane, now seemed to be the strangest state of all.

Wrapping his cloak tighter against the breeze, Rupert tramped after Haribeaux, into the stunted and grim, new universe. Downwind from his grotesque companion, Rupert caught the scent of burnt sugar. When he eventually caught up with Harry, he broke the silence with a trace of affinity that surprised them both.

“Do you enjoy your work?” he asked.

“What?” rumbled Harry. He'd heard the question. He just wanted clarification that Rupert really wanted to attempt some casual chit-chat.

“At Bankside,” said Rupert. “Do you... enjoy your work?”

“Yes,” Harry replied. “Some of the time.”

“How did you come to be in the service of Father Christèmas?” Rupert asked.

“He recognised my talent and offered me a job,” said Harry.

“Was this... in the form of a vision?” Rupert wondered.

Haribeaux stopped dead in his tracks.

“Wait a minute,” he hissed, a sharpness returning to his tone. “Don't think for a *moment* that my contract with Chris is in anyway comparable to whatever moronic epiphany led *you* to the Faction, Cousin … whatever-your-name-is... you miserable little acolyte!”

“Rupert,” mumbled Rupert.

“All this death-cult, goth-wank, slumming-it-with-the-mortals bollocks!” Harry spat, waving his hands in frustration. “I could not give a shit about you, your Ministry or your invisible fucking Grandfather! All I care about is my work! My experiments! Parliament love the results of what I do! I leave Chris to deal with those fatuous morons and he leaves me to get on with what I do best...”

Harry's rant trailed off. He had become distracted. He turned his head away from Rupert and stared up the path, towards a rocky outcrop in the distance.

“There's someone over there,” said Harry, quietly.

Rupert looked in the direction Harry was staring, but he couldn't see anyone.

“Where?” whispered Rupert, doubtfully.

“Behind those rocks over there,” Harry insisted. “I can *smell* them.”

“From here?” said Rupert.

“My exo-skull is an olfactory sensor ten times as powerful as a grizzly bear!” roared Haribeaux. “I can smell *exactly* how scared *you* are, right now, little cousin!”

“Who... *is* it, then!?” Rupert exclaimed.

“We're supposed to be the only two people in this entire universe,” Harry replied. “I'm going to have that sneaky bastard! Whoever the fuck he is!”

Chapter Eighteen: Here's One I Prepared Earlier

“Re: Death In Custody - G. Mortimer

Deceased's Personal Affects: 1x Leather suitcase, contents - human remains (technologically augmented bones, dormant), sucrose (traces)

*Request Details: We have reason to believe that the human remains belong to a renowned mercenary pharmacologist. Our intention is to offer to reconstitute said individual in return for his initiation**

*(*See, Recruitment dossier, 'Little Brother Haribeaux')*

Receiving Officer: Aquister Primate

Forward To: Bankside Facility”

- *Official Request to the Boulevard of Alternate Brutalities From Aquister Primate, Bankside*

Haribeaux thundered up the path.

Rupert jogged a few metres behind.

They reached the top of the incline and Harry stopped in front of a large boulder. He lifted his head, as though sniffing the air. Rupert noticed Harry's shadow, cast on the side of the rock. Protruding from the shadow's right fist was a six-inch long spike. He was clearly ready to punch a hole into whoever was hiding out here.

Rupert swallowed, wondering whether he should draw his own shadow weapon in support. He had barely ever retrieved his sword since the initial ritual attached it to his own shadow and had never had call to use it in an actual combat scenario.

“Wait here,” whispered Harry. He padded around the boulder as silently as his bulk allowed him and disappeared behind the rock.

Endless seconds passed.

“It's alright!” called Haribeaux from some distance away. “Come and have a look at this!”

Rupert relaxed slightly and went to see what Harry had found.

Behind the boulder was a steep incline, leading down to what looked like a derelict church. The building was as grey and morbid as the rest of the landscape. Its doors hung off their hinges like rotting teeth and the empty, yearning windows stared out in despair.

Haribeaux had his back to him and was crouched next to the entrance, examining something on the floor.

Rupert skidded down the incline and jogged over to see what he was looking at.

It was a body.

The body of a frail, old man, his complexion grey and translucent. He was dressed in a black cloak and his bony frame was lost within its folds. The dead man's expression was one of peace and transcendence.

"We are the only ones here after all," murmured Harry.

"Who is he?" said Rupert, "How did he get in here?"

Haribeaux tutted. "Didn't you hear what I just said, moron?" he spat. "I said, '*We* are the only ones here'! Look at him!"

Rupert looked closer and the realisation slapped him in the face.

"It's... *me*," he gasped.

"Yep," said Harry, losing interest in the body, standing up and wandering over to the entrance of the church.

Rupert stared at the corpse. His own corpse. Ancient, fragile.

He reached out to touch it.

"Best not to," said Harry and Rupert withdrew his hand with a start.

"H... How...?" stuttered Rupert.

"It's just a blue-phase," said Harry. "No big deal. Come on!"

"'No big deal'!?" yelped Rupert, fear and panic tearing through his system. "That's *me* lying dead there! What's a 'blue-phase'!? What the hell is going on!"

“It's just an infected time-splinter!” blustered Haribeaux. “A harmless side-effect of the Blue Praxis experiments. Relax! Look, he's fading already!”

Sure enough, the corpse was disintegrating before their eyes. Its face folded gently in on itself, turning to fine grey dust that was then caught and scattered by the wind. In a few seconds the body had dissolved completely.

Rupert's mind was reeling. He wanted to run, to leave this diabolical place and his hateful guide. To return to the Ministry and forget he had ever been South of the River. Haribeaux stood, impatiently tapping his foot, his hands on his hips. His eyes swirled.

What was he doing? Was he attempting to appear *inscrutable*?

Rupert became suspicious. This was some kind of test.

“Did you... do *this*?” Rupert accused.

“Tt! Don't be ridiculous!” Harry exclaimed. “If you get so upset by such a trifling little temporal quirk, then do us both a favour and bugger off back to your side of the river and leave me to get on with my work in peace!”

Rupert stood up straight. “That... won't be necessary. Lead on,” he said. “You can explain what just happened here on the way.”

“Suit yourself,” said Harry and walked inside the church.

The building was gutted, with a dirt floor and large holes in the high ceiling. There was another airlock door, set into the floor. It was already open.

“There's your problem,” said Harry. “Some idiot left the door open.” He swung his legs over the side of the pit and began to lower himself down the ladder.

“Shut it behind you, this time!” he shouted as he disappeared from view.

Rupert opened his mouth to protest that it hadn't been him that left it open. Then he realised the implication. The last one to use this door must have been the old man they had found outside. He took a moment

to take control of his ever-increasing levels of apprehension.

He felt sick to his bones. Whatever these experiments entailed, could they already be affecting him? What had Haribeaux said? 'An infected time-splinter'? Was that *really* nothing to worry about? Did Haribeaux even have a clue what he was doing?

What the hell *was* Blue Praxis anyway? He couldn't make head nor tail of the report. Antigone and everyone else seemed to understand it. Rupert was just taking its significance on trust. For a fleeting moment, he entertained the idea that maybe everybody else was doing the same as him, that Blue Praxis was just a set of the emperor's new clothes.

This was too horrible to contemplate. He was heading into yet another, separate universe with a madman, to perform an experiment that no one fully understood.

He had to remember his duty to the Ministry.

The Godmother was relying on him.

Rupert climbed onto the ladder and sealed the door behind him.

Chapter Nineteen: Blue Praxis

“Having attempted to deal with the Pilots' Coterie, who claim to have exclusive access to 'true' Praxis, we found the Coterie to be obstructive to the point of idiocy (This is probably because they enjoy having one over on Faction Paradox or that they are lying or both).

So, given that 'Praxis' is a substance that is so hard to come by that it may as well be fictional, Cousin Haribeaux has developed a substitute that is safer, more stable and has verifiable results. There is the added advantage that this substance can be proven to actually exist.

He has christened this new substance 'Blue Praxis'“

- *From the Introduction 'Report: Blue Praxis Initial Results' (Father Christèmas)*

The next universe was very different.

They stood on the threshold of a massive, spherical room, tiled with sapphire-blue squares. There was laboratory equipment dotted across the floor, up the walls and on the ceiling. The air was conditioned, cool and clinical.

Harry tramped into the room. He walked forward to where the curved floor met the curved wall, then carried on walking up the wall. “Come in if you're coming!” he bellowed over his shoulder. He arrived at the point where the curve of the wall met the curve of the ceiling and carried on walking once more.

He stopped at a bank of machinery on the ceiling, directly above Rupert's head and began booting up the electronic equipment. Rupert stepped into the room. Harry threw a switch and the door sealed behind them.

The room had no walls or ceiling, only a floor.

It was as though they were walking on the inside of a blue crystal ball. Rupert wandered over to join Harry, on the 'ceiling'. As Rupert walked across the inner surface of this blue globe, it felt as if he that was staying in one position, at the bottom of the sphere, and it was the room that was moving, all around him. It was an eerie sensation, but

he told himself it was no more strange than the illusion of the sun moving across the sky, when in fact, it was the Earth that did all the spinning.

"What do you want to see first?" muttered Haribeaux, hunched over an antiquated computer.

"The results of the human trial, please," said Rupert. "Is it possible to speak to the subjects themselves?"

Haribeaux sighed, "Do you *fully* understand what Blue Praxis is? What it can do?" he asked.

"Yes," said Rupert, emphatically.

"Well, now I know you're lying," said Harry. "I pretty much invented it and even *I* don't understand what it is and what it can do!"

"I … read the report..." Rupert insisted.

"Yes, well, the important thing about that report that you read," Haribeaux explained, "is that the results appeared on the apparatus spontaneously. I have yet to find a suitable human subject."

Rupert prickled with surprise. He couldn't quite believe what Haribeaux was saying. It seemed it was as exactly as Godmother Antigone had suspected. But why was Harry suddenly confessing to this fraud unprompted?

Perhaps he really did feel some sense of camaraderie with Rupert, that they were both lowly Cousins together, toiling at the whim of their ruthless superiors. Did Haribeaux need to unburden himself?

Rupert smiled inwardly at this unexpected turn of events. He needed to be careful now. He needed more. He needed Haribeaux to implicate Christèmas. If he could deliver the Aquister Primate, then Bankside was finished and Cousin Rupert could return to the Ministry with all the ammunition the Godmother needed to put an end to their apostasy.

"Were you acting on Father Christèmas's instruction?" he asked, with feigned sympathy.

"What?" snorted Harry.

“Did he... pressure you to falsify the results?” said Rupert.

“No one falsified anything, you moron!” bellowed Haribeaux. “Didn't you hear what I said!? The results *appeared* **on the apparatus** *spontaneously***! That** *was* **the breakthrough! You missed the whole point!”**

Haribeaux turned and grabbed Rupert by the shoulder, pushed him in front of the console and jabbed a finger at the monitor.

“Look!” he shouted, and read the text from the screen. *“'The subject is unnamed for security purposes. The experiment began with the violent hallucinations, before subject became more lucid and was able to reconfigure local space/time into a scenario of his own choosing...'* **- See!? It's the results of an experiment that has yet to occur! That's how we knew...”**

“Wait,” said Rupert, the extremities of his understanding brushed against a cold truth. He remembered. “That... *other* **me... outside...you mean... the subject..?”**

“It's *you***,” whispered Cousin Haribeaux.**

Rupert swallowed.

“*You* **are the subject!” Haribeaux shrieked in triumph. “The experiment happens** *now***!”**

“Now... wait a minute,” said Rupert, holding up his hands in a vain attempt to calm the situation. “Aren't we getting a little ahead of ourselves? Jumping to conclusions?”

Haribeaux was already readying the equipment. He scuttled across the internal surface of the blue room, flicking switches and turning dials. He twisted the combination lock on what looked like a refrigerated safe.

“Cousin Haribeaux!” exclaimed Rupert with more panic than authority. “I forbid you to... *do***...** *this***!”**

“Oh, don't be so melodramatic!” snorted Haribeaux. “You're about to make yourself indispensable! You've seen the results for yourself! This will be the safest pharmacological test in history. The experiment will be a success. It's a foregone conclusion!”

Rupert's brain swirled. His stomach knotted and he lost all the moisture in the throat. Frantically, he searched the screen for the results of the experiment.

'...After 1 hour 22 minutes, the subject's metabolic processes returned to an identical state as prior to the start of the experiment... The subject felt 'energized', 'inspired' and 'happy to have contributed to such an important event in the Faction's cause…'

"The...the blue-phase," Rupert stuttered. "The infected time splinter... what *was* **that? The** *other* **me? What happened exactly?"**

"Nothing to worry about..." said Harry.

"Explain to me what it is and *I* **shall** *decide* **if it is anything I should worry about, Cousin!" Rupert bellowed, his tone at last, carrying weight enough for Haribeaux to take note.**

"A 'blue-phase' is just a duplicate biodata strand," Harry explained, begrudgingly. "If the lab had been sealed properly, it would just have been reabsorbed, as though it had never existed. As it escaped the lab, the biodata strand became an 'infected time-splinter'. Alternative variables make it impossible to reintegrate - which is why I told you not to touch it - but they don't last very long anyway. As you observed. Like I said, 'Nothing to worry about.' *Happy***?"**

Rupert was not happy.

But neither was he one to shirk his duty or his destiny.

Harry continued making preparations on the ceiling. He had wheeled out an operating table and was attaching wires and straps into various ports and buckles.

Rupert struggled to stop himself from hyperventilating.

"Will it hurt?" he asked, quietly.

"Not in the traditional sense," said Haribeaux.

Chapter Twenty: The Sleep of the Just

"Cousin Ceol has proven to be the perfect candidate, demonstrating tenacity, adaptability and passion. I would have no hesitation in accepting her onto my personal staff, but I suspect she would rather be master of her own destiny.

"I fear Cousin Ceol would be gunning for my job in no time and it would be disappointing for me to have to take out such a promising newcomer, not to mention the fact that she would have a fair to middling chance herself of taking me out, and that, for me, would be even more disappointing."

- *From Cousin Ceol's Initiation report (Godfather Starch)*

Three hundred miles north of Hades, the landscape of Pluto became scarred with angular valleys and squared-off hills, reconfigured by the work of generations of miners. There, tucked between the man-made gorges of mineral harvests, lay the Eurydice colliery, the home to Pluto's new first family.

The Hooper-Agogô residence was an unassuming cottage amongst a collection of fifty or so similar dwellings. Only twelve were still inhabited, as the mines' most productive days were now behind them. The mineral seams were mostly spent, but the colliery supported itself by using the vacant shafts as crystal farms.

It was second sunset and the moon, Charon, was simultaneously eclipsing its own artificial star. A blue-green aurora dappled the night sky, describing a state of perpetual dawn. Pluto had no strict demarcations for night and day, thanks to this graceful, geometric bolero of its moons and their accompanying, synthetic suns. Times for sleep and for wakefulness were negotiable.

It was the last family meal before the Lady President was to depart on her first diplomatic tour of the PROTEC worlds and Sojourner's family had made sure it was an extra special one. There had been copious amounts of delicious food, free flowing wine, music and laughter.

It was such a perfect time that Sojourner almost forgot her deal with the devil.

Given the special occasion, Anami had been allowed to stay up later than normal, but as the evening drew on, she had fallen asleep in her mother's lap.

“We could still come with you, Mum,” said Rez. “I can throw a few bits in a bag right now. There's nothing happening here I can't put on hold.”

Sojourner shook her head, “No. There's no need. I'll be so busy. I won't be able to pay you guys any attention. You'll just get bored. I've got this. Seriously. It's fine.”

Rex offered around the last few drops of wine. His daughter considered the offer, then glanced at the sleeping child in her lap. “No thanks, Dad,” muttered Rez. “I think I'll go and put this little one down and then turn in myself.”

“OK, sweetheart,” said Rex. He leant down and kissed them both goodnight.

Cradling Anami, Rez walked over to her mother, who was contentedly curled up on the couch. Sojourner stood and hugged her daughter tightly.

“Easy, Mum!” giggled Rez, “You're going to squash us!”

“My babies,” whispered Sojourner. “Thank you. I love you.”

“We love you too,” said Rez, kissing her mother and heading towards the stairs.

As she passed the window at the foot of the stairs, Rez stopped and called out gently, “Night, Ellie!” A ritual she had performed every night since she had first learned to talk.

Outside, L-Event raised the tip of her trunk in response, waving Rez up the wooden hill to Bedfordshire.

Sweet dreams. See you in the morning.

Rex joined his wife on the couch, filling both their glasses with the remainder of the wine, and placed the empty bottle on the coffee table in front of them. The bottle left a red ring on the corner of one of Anami's abstract crayon drawings. No one noticed.

“Have you packed everything?” asked Rex.

“Everything is in Ellie,” said Sojourner.

“Yeah, I know. But is there any little thing *here* that you want to take?” said Rex.

“Only you guys,” said Sojourner, squeezing her husband closer.

“I have patients to attend to, my dear Lady President,” Rex replied, nibbling Sojourner's neck. “I can't think of anything nicer than swanning about with you on Eris and Haumea for a couple of weeks. But, some of us have Nib Blenkinsop's neural implant to attend to and Jenni Frax's twins are due any day now...”

“I know,” muttered his wife, “I'm just going to miss you, that's all.”

Rex chuckled, “You've got really sentimental since you've become the most powerful woman in the world, you know!”

“Oh, shut up!”

“No, it's fine. I like it!”

“It's just...”

Sojourner paused.

She wanted to tell him everything. She wanted to say that she had been lying to him since forever. She wanted to scream, to beg his forgiveness and tell him that, when she leaves, she might never see him or their daughter or their granddaughter ever again.

“They never warn you,” said Sojourner at last.

She stared intently into her husband's warm, compassionate eyes. “They tell you that you can achieve whatever you set your mind to. They tell you that you are stronger than you can possibly imagine. With hard work, with sacrifice and with determination - with never, *ever* giving up - you can have everything you ever wanted.”

“And... that's true, isn't it?” asked Rex.

“Yes,” Sojourner agreed, flatly. “That *is* true. But, I think I only did what I did because I didn't know what else to do. At the start, at least.

Eventually, you discover that you have everything you ever strived for and they never warned you, at the start, that when you get it, how utterly terrifying it is."

Rex stroked her hair, "First day at big school tomorrow," he said. "You're bound to be a little nervous."

"When I had nothing, I had nothing to lose," she said.

"Come on," he reassured her, "You are the most adored woman in the entire system. You earned that through your commitment and dedication. Now, you are going out there and letting all those people show you just what you mean to them. What you have done for them. They want to thank you."

He kissed her.

"You deserve everything you've got coming to you, Sojo," he emphasized.

Sojourner nodded, but her smile did not quite complete.

"What is it?" asked Rex.

"I need you to... take care of things... while I'm gone," she said.

"Don't I always?" he replied. "What's going on, love?"

"Nothing," she lied. "It just feels like... now that the Company have finally cleared out... that it's time to pay the piper."

Rex tutted and finished his wine, "C'mon, bed time," he said, "You're getting maudlin. Busy day tomorrow."

They collected up the empty glasses and cups and bottles and dumped them in the kitchen. Then they switched off the lights, said goodnight to L-Event and went upstairs to bed.

They kissed, undressed and entwined, indulging in the deeply affectionate-yet-efficient style of sex that only the longtime married-with-children can master.

Busy day tomorrow. Children up early. Lots to do.

If it was to be Sojourner's last night under this roof, she could not

have asked for a more perfect one.

But, after she had come, she lay in the dark listening to her husband breathing contentedly and decided that not only was she going to ask for another day like this, she was going to demand it.

Father Christèmas will curse the day he had ever backed Sojourner Hooper-Agogô into a corner.

L-Event concurred.

Shortly after this personal pronouncement, the Lady President drifted off to sleep and through some quirk of sheer bloody-mindedness, she feigned the sleep of the just.

Chapter Twenty One: RSVP

"The Exulted Coruscacia De Rein, Indeterminatrix of Serendipity Keep, Formally Invites

Lady President Sojourner Hooper-Agogô of the Plutonic Republic of Technosapien Enhanced Cultures,

To Celebrate 500 years of Devotion - the Serendipity Keep Quincentennial Jubilee - A Chance For All"

- *Formal invitation to PROTEC President from Chance Coteries*

The presidential transport ship, *The Felicitation***, settled itself gently onto the common.**

For a craft so massive, it was surprisingly quiet, the engines sounding more like a strong gale, blowing across the valley. The ship dwarfed the entire Eurydice settlement. L-Event and the colliery's other massive mining robots seemed like toys in comparison. A gargantuan wedge of blue-grey metal, the ship was like some great anvil, designed to bend the vast distances between worlds into more manageable dimensions.

The ship was known as 'Felicity' to her friends.

The engines ceased, a huge service door peeled back and a metal ramp unravelled. Buzzing down the ramp came a small torpedo-shaped shuttle-car. It shot across the common and drew to a halt outside Sojourner's house.

Mason Peak stepped out of the car, walked up to the front door and knocked.

"Good morning, Mason," said Sojourner, as she opened the door. She was ready to leave, dressed in her trademark overalls.

"I am going to ride with you, Sojourner," said Mason, unfolding his tablet. "There's a lot to brief you on." He tapped the tablet's screen and the empty shuttle-car sped off, back to the ship.

"Fine," she replied. She wasn't fond of sharing L-Event's howdah with anyone. Mason was the only other person outside of her

immediate family for whom she made this exception.

Her family joined her in at the door. Anami wasn't interested in kissing her grandma goodbye, she toddled off to take care of more pressing business. Rez kissed her mother and said she would see her a couple of weeks, before chasing after her own baby daughter.

Rex took his wife in his arms. "You let the people look after you," he whispered in her ear. "That's what this trip is all about."

Sojourner nodded, "Will do," she promised. "You don't mind if I do some work at the same time, do you?"

Rex shrugged, "You're the president, love."

She looked him square in the eye. He was right. She *was* the president.

"I'm coming back," she told him with no lack of emphasis.

"I know, dear," he replied, oblivious to her resolute tone. "But you can only do that if you *go* in the first place. So, come on, I've got to be at the surgery ten minutes ago! Mason and Ellie are waiting. Run along!"

They kissed, then Rex shooed her towards Mason. "Call me when you get settled on Eris," Rex added. She nodded, then walked over to join her PA, waiting patiently on L-Event's tail lift. The mammoth scooped her two passengers onto her back and opened her howdah. Inside, Sojourner threw off her jacket, dumping it on a nearby seat.

"Good morning, L-Event," said Mason as he stepped through the door. He was fully aware how honoured he was to be allowed inside the mechanical beast and his reverent inflection underlined this fact.

"Good Morning, Mason," said Ellie. "Please, make yourself at home. Help yourself to refreshments."

The howdah was an open plan, self-contained unit. To the fore was the pilot's seat, a massive, ergonomic throne, surrounded by screens and controls that looked impressive, but were largely redundant. The seat was more for show than anything else, which was doubly strange as Sojourner was usually the only one present. Sitting in the seat afforded the best view from the colossal window that filled the entire

front wall of the howdah.

There was a kitchen area to the left and a laboratory to the right and a relaxation hub in the centre, with comfortable chairs and a large, circular table. There was a stairwell that lead down to the pilot's sleeping quarters and bathroom. It also granted access to L-Event's automated mineral processing factory, which took up the vast majority of the mining robot's internal space.

"Let's go, Ellie," said the Lady President and the mammoth moved off towards the transport ship. The howdah's suspension was such that the only sensation of movement came from the changing view from the circle of panoramic windows.

Mason made coffee and they both sat at the table to discuss the day's itinerary.

"The Eris reception has been extended," Mason explained. "The turnout is going to be much bigger than anticipated. The Dysnomia contingent have announced that they going to be there in force, so we've had to shuffle everything back a few hours to compensate and we've canned their flyby, because what's the point if everyone is on Eris anyway? It doesn't make any lasting difference and we're back to the original schedule by the time we reach Haumea."

L-Event approached *The Felicitation*. Felicity welcomed Ellie aboard and the mammoth thanked the ship in return. She strolled up the ramp, into the cavernous docking bay and the ship sealed itself behind her. The bay had a fleet of support craft inside, both military and diplomatic, with a staff of one hundred and twenty.

Sojourner sipped her coffee, "So, the meet and greet is how much longer?"

"Twice as long," Mason explained, "Is that a problem?"

"Not at all," she replied, "That's the fun part."

"Oh, yes! That reminds me! You will not *believe* where you have been invited!" her PA chuckled.

Imperceptibly, Sojourner stiffened. She raised quizzical eyebrows.

"Serendipity Keep have invited you to their big anniversary bash!"

Mason laughed. "If you can believe the nerve of them!"

"That's... the Chance Coteries, isn't it?" asked the president, absently from behind her coffee mug.

"Yes!" exclaimed Mason. "They've sent a personal invitation from, I don't know, their *queen* or whatever form of dictatorship it is. I forget. I shall take enormous pleasure in composing your reply. A polite but *cutting* refusal. Don't worry, I shall be subtle..."

"Hang on, Mason," said Sojourner. "Shouldn't we even *discuss* the possibility?"

Mason wrinkled his nose, "What's to discuss?" he wondered.

"Well," said the president, clearing her throat. "Perhaps... for the sake of diplomacy... we should at least *consider* attending..."

Mason was not sure where the president was going with this. His watery green eyes stared, unblinking, at Sojourner, as if waiting for the punchline. When none was forthcoming, he decided to clarify what he thought she was saying.

"So," he said, "You think you *should* attend this... *soiree*... being held by some of post-humanities worst asset-hoarders and slavers... for *diplomatic* reasons?"

"We are ready to leave," said L-Event.

"Tell Felicity to go ahead, please, Ellie," said Sojourner.

The Felicitation **fired up its engines and rose from Pluto's surface. It had left the planet's atmosphere twenty seconds later and was accelerating, exponentially, towards the local sun. It used the faux-star's gravitational influence to propel itself still faster, before engaging warp drive and hurling itself in the direction of Eris on the crest of a wave of distorted spacetime.**

"Are you *serious*?" asked Mason, dumbfounded.

Sojourner blinked.

She had been over what she had planned to say to Mason, over and over. She knew it backwards, but now she was looking him in the face

and lying, blatantly, to him, her most trusted friend and ally.

“I heard,” said Sojourner, launching into her script, “that the Chance Coteries have taken to cymbiosis in a big way lately. What if we use this opportunity to inspire them? Maybe, one day, they could have their own revolution?”

Mason's expression softened from disgust to condescension. It seemed that she had convinced him that her motives were pure, at least.

“That's all very sweet, Sojourner,” he said, “But, seriously, how much “inspiring” do you really think you are going to be able to do in that sort of situation? In that nasty display of disposable wealth? You'd look naïve, at best and at worst, hypocritical. You, my dear Lady President, are neither of those things. What's to be gained for the Republic?”

Sojourner didn't have a convincing answer.

“All the same, Mason,” she asserted, “let me have a think about it before you reply.”

Mason sighed and shook his head gently.

“Do you understand me, Mason?” asked the Lady President, now with an edge to her voice.

Mason nodded.

The esteem Sojourner had lost during the exchange was palpable. L-Event did her best to reassure her that this state of affairs was merely temporary. She would win back Mason's confidence in time.

'Everything is temporary, Ellie,' thought Sojourner, but she knew that the damage had already been done. The worst thing was that, before they were finished, she would be vandalizing her own reputation still further.

As her standing began to unravel, Sojourner turned to her PA.

“What's next on the agenda?” she asked.

Chapter Twenty Two: Anne Alone

"With the War being fought on several fronts simultaneously, discrepancies in continuity are inevitable. 'Oxbow realities' can be a useful side effect of these discontinuities.

With so much rewriting of events, it was found that sequences could, at times, become detached from the main body of causality. The beauty of these Oxbow realties is that inhabitants are unaware of their separation. The changes happen on such an incremental scale, that it becomes almost impossible to detect.

There has been some success in deliberately isolating small strands of events. Individual experiences are particularly susceptible, the effect corresponding in direct relation to the subject's level of narcissism.

It has been suggested that the War could even be 'won' by isolating every individual participant in their own Oxbow reality. This would of course be incredibly difficult to achieve on such a scale.

It might be better to isolate only the most narcissistic participants. There are schools of thought (admittedly optimistic ones) that suggest the War may even resolve itself spontaneously with only a few key figures 'quarantined' within their own, personal heroic victory."

- *Entry on Oxbow Realities, The Book of the Truce (Godfather Morlock)*

The Kraken broke the surface of the water.

The sea was still and the night, deep and dark. Cold, sharp air carried wisps of white mist that curled around the silhouette of a schooner at anchor. The Kraken yawned silently, regurgitating a small rowing boat containing the lone figure of Anne Bonny, dressed in black for battle.

She paddled the boat gently towards the schooner. The Kraken sealed its maw and slid back below the water to wait for its mistress's call.

Anne's breath hit the icy air in hot, tenacious clouds. Her respiration struck a rhythm with the splash of the oars as she girded herself for combat. She stopped rowing twenty feet from the schooner,

letting momentum carry the rowing boat the remainder of the way.

The only sound from the looming hulk was the creak of the rigging.

She should have been more suspicious.

“We are ready when you are, my dear,” crackled the Hussar's voice from the device concealed in Anne's gold-hoop earrings.

“You sound crackly,” whispered Anne.

“Really?” said the voice, now even more distorted and faint. “Hang on, I'll just...”

There was an electronic hiss, then a click, then silence.

The rowing boat reached the schooner.

Anne tied off the boat and waited a few seconds for a response from the Hussar, drumming her fingers on the hilt of her sword. Exhausting her patience in exactly seventeen seconds, she climbed the rigging and dropped, catlike, onto the deck.

The helm was unmanned and there was not a soul in sight.

Unsheathing her sword, she headed below deck.

A lantern flickered at the foot of the steps. Anne tilted her head, listening for any sign of the crew. All she could hear was the sea lapping against the hull. She tapped her earring, but there still came no reply from the Kraken.

A curious sensation stirred in Anne's belly. It took her a moment to identify the fact that she was actually nervous. It had been an age since she had ever felt anything approaching vulnerable. The sensation made her vaguely nauseated, but there was also a frisson of something she had missed.

Anne's blood quickened as she made for the hold.

She ducked soundlessly through the shadows. The deeper she moved into the ship, the more obvious it became that the crew were entirely missing.

Then, a sound.

A scratching, squeaking sound, faint but measured. She could not clearly identify it, but it was obviously being made by human hand. She headed towards the sound, deeper into the bowels of the schooner, and shortly found herself at the doors of the ship's hold.

The squeaking sound was coming from within. The noise had become more urgent, almost impatient, daring Anne to reveal its derivation.

She extinguished the flame of a nearby lantern, so as not to reveal herself too soon to whoever lay within the hold. Then, she quietly opened the door.

The hold was largely empty and soaked in darkness. At the far end of the room, illuminated by a single lantern, was a man, seated on a golden throne. He was bald, dressed in a crimson, crushed velvet suit and was entirely preoccupied by a multi-coloured cube that he held in his hands.

He twisted the cube irritably. It was clearly some kind of puzzle and was the source of the mysterious squeaking sound. The man clicked his tongue, examined the facets of the cube and sighed testily.

Anne drew her pistol and stalked into the room. “Don't move,” she instructed.

The man looked up from the cube. He beamed at Anne in what might have been a good natured manner, but his lack of eyebrows rendered the effect disconcerting.

“Who are you?” she demanded. “What are you doing here?”

“Trying to solve this thing,” said the man, waving the cube, at her. “I don't really have the patience, if I'm honest. I think I might take a hammer to the bastard.”

Something from the shadows struck Anne hard on her pistol hand. She screamed, more in surprise than pain. The gun flew from her grasp and skidded across the floor.

Anne slashed at the shadows with her sword. The blade connected. A chink of metal against metal. Bonny was taken aback. She had yet to find anything her sword could not pass through.

Something scraped along the length of her blade, connected sharply with her wrist and sent her sword clattering to the deck.

Anne froze, unarmed.

The man stood up, then casually stooped to pick up Bonny's gun that had ended up at his feet. He cocked the pistol, walked toward Anne and levelled the barrel at her forehead.

“This is very disappointing,” he sighed.

Chapter Twenty Three: Opportunity Knocks

"I have three daughters, my Lord, the first is called **Patience***, the second* **Temperance***, the third* **Chastity***, and one also named* **Sobriety***, all these by this Christmas's means, are injuriously dealt withal, and violently handled, which before his coming, were in good estimation in Gentlemen's houses"*

- *The Examination and Tryal of Old Father Christmas (Josiah King, 1686)*

"You're out of shape, Anne love," said the man. "It's that ponce you've been running with, I reckon. He's dulled your edge. Look at you! You're a fucking cartoon!"

"I'll kill you!" screamed Bonny, her pale skin turning red, as much with the shame of being caught out so easily as with her incandescent rage.

"Where is he anyway?" asked the man, through a patronising grin. "Your little Houseworld scamp? He should have your back, shouldn't he?"

Bonny spat like a cobra.

The man side-stepped the flying blob of phlegm, dodging it narrowly with a laugh.

"That's more like it!" he hooted, genuinely impressed. "This is the Anne Bonny I was expecting to see! Chaz, come and say hello to Anne!"

A woman stepped out of the shadows. This was the one who had disarmed her.

The woman nodded to Anne. The newcomer's expression was hard and emotionless. Her dark hair was tied back, sharply and her hands were jammed in the pockets of her black jacket. She was slightly shorter than Anne, but more powerfully built. She carried herself in the controlled manner of one well versed in the swift delivery of violence.

There was no sign of any weapon. How had this woman parried the

sword?

Then, Bonny noticed the shadows lapping around the woman in an aura of rippling darkness, as if the surrounding air were some turbulent, black tide.

“You're elementals,” muttered Anne.

“Nope,” said the man. “We're as human as you. Well, we haven't had as much work done as you, of course. I expect we're marginally *more* **human than you** *specifically*, **but we're virtually family. This here is your Cousin Chantelle and I'm Father Christèmas.”**

Christèmas flipped the gun in his hand and passed it, handle first, back to Bonny.

“What do you say we dial back our passions a few degrees and have a little chat?” he suggested.

Bonny snatched the pistol. Neither Christèmas nor Chantelle flinched, but the shadows flickered in gentle warning.

“What have you done with the Hussar?” demanded Anne.

“Nothing,” Christèmas replied, “He has just been a little delayed. We wanted a few moments with the organ grinder rather than the monkey. Actually, how are we doing for time, Chaz?”

Chantelle checked her watch. “Five minutes,” she said.

“Right!” said Christèmas, clapping his hands, “If you would like to put your pistol away - and Chaz, could you hand Ms Bonny her sword, please? Thank you! - We can, perhaps stop threatening each other and get down to business, what do you reckon?”

Chantelle's shadow sprouted an arm that scooped up Anne's sword from the floor and passed it back to its owner. Warily, Anne holstered her pistol and her sword and listened.

“How long have you been travelling with the Hussar?” asked Christèmas. “Months? Years?”

Bonny thought. It was hard to say. Long enough that she had been able to forget. It must have been several years now. Sometimes it felt

like all of her life.

"Have you never wondered why you have never met anyone like us until today?" Christèmas went on. "In all that time, why have you not met anyone who stood a chance of beating you in a fight?"

Anne had clearly been aware of this fact on some unconscious level, but perhaps not in those terms. She had been getting bored for some time, just hadn't quite reached the point that she had figured out why or what to do about it.

"Your little House-Renegade boyfriend may claim to be a free agent, but he is just on very long leash," Christèmas explained. "The Great Houses tolerate his behaviour as long as his activities are contained within certain parameters. He keeps his crimes to specific, demarcated areas of space and time, where his interference is of no consequence and so long as he stays within those boundaries, the Great Houses don't ever feel the need to yank his chain."

Anne furrowed her brow. From previous conversations with the Hussar, she knew that at least some of what Christèmas had said was true but the Hussar had always claimed that his limitations were down to laws of nature rather than any contractual obligation.

Although, when dealing with elementals, was there any *real* difference?

"Who *are* you?" asked Anne. It was not a demand, this time. It was an inquisitive purr.

"Funnily enough, we are employed by an organisation that was founded by another renegade of the Great Houses," said Christèmas. "In fact, it was his entire bloodline that went rogue. 'House Paradox' they called it, back in the day. When they finally went completely independent it was rebranded..."

"Faction Paradox!" Anne exclaimed.

"The same," said Christèmas, with a short bow. "He's mentioned us, then?"

"Once or twice," said Anne. "Nothing complimentary."

"I don't doubt it," said Christèmas. "The question is, do *you* doubt

me?"

Anne narrowed her eyes.

"What do you want, Father Christèmas?" she wondered.

Christèmas shared a glance with Chantelle, then cleared his throat. "Ms Bonny," he announced, "I would very much like to hire your services, and also those of the Hussar, for a job I am planning."

"What sort of job?" asked Anne.

"A... repossession," said Christèmas.

"Surely, Faction Paradox has their own people who can..."

"This is off the books."

"'*Off the books*'?"

"I am not here as a representative of Faction Paradox, Anne," Christèmas emphasized. "I am here as a private individual with access to certain resources. Just like you. What I am asking is whether you would be interested in pooling said resources for one job, to the mutual benefit of all parties?"

"I imagine it would not be to the benefit of the party you plan to rob," mused Anne.

"Aww, who cares about them?" laughed Christèmas. "Are you interested?"

"What would we be expected to do?" asked Anne.

"Why would anyone want to hire the services of the fabled Anne Bonny?" said Christèmas. "Listen, we are a little pushed for time right now. We can go into specifics later. The important point is that you are interested. Now all you have to do is persuade your boyfriend."

"Wait a minute..."

"Look, we knew he would disregard our proposition out of hand," Christèmas went on. "This job would mean he would have to slip his leash. He's old school Great Houses, which means, despite all his rebellious posturing, he is monumentally stuck in his ways. He can't

help it. It's part of his biology. I could never hope to explain that fact to him. You could."

"But what if I can't convince him!?" snapped Bonny.

"Oh, come on, Anne!" said Christèmas, "The Hussar may well be the time-travelling elemental, but it's obvious who wears the trousers in your set-up."

Chantelle tapped her watch.

"Right, he's on his way," said Christèmas, handing Anne his puzzle cube. "Once you've got him onside, this cube contains all the details of our next rendezvous. Just plug it into your timeship and you're good to go."

Then, Christèmas gestured towards the gold throne he had been sitting in. "This is the remainder of the treasure that you were after. We went to the trouble of fashioning it into a throne, fit for the Queen of the Pirates. A gift to you, to show our goodwill."

"Chris," said Chantelle, impatiently.

"Right, we're gone," Christèmas announced. "Have a seat, Anne. Take a load off. Speak soon."

Bonny opened her mouth to speak then and there, but Chantelle and Christèmas were already off, across the hold, towards the exit at a brisk pace. The door was opened, passed through and slammed shut before Anne formed her first word of protest.

She gave chase, flinging open the door, but found the corridor beyond completely empty. The two renegades of Faction Paradox had vanished into the ether.

Bonny swore. An electronic hiss emanated from her earring communicator.

"Anne?" said the Hussar. "What's going on? Are you ready?"

The pirate queen looked over at her golden throne.

"Ready?" she said, "I'm all done."

Chapter Twenty Four: Domestic

“There are occasional myths and obscure legends that speak of other groups and bloodlines, equal and opposite, yet just as illustrious as the Great Houses themselves. These 'Exo Houses' are said to have existed before the Anchoring of the Thread - the point when the physical laws, drafted by the Homeworld, came into effect and causality was obliged to obey.

If any of these 'Exo Houses' had ever truly existed, then the Anchoring meant that they could no longer exist, had not ever existed or no longer wished to exist within the Homeworld's restricted parameters.

Whether there is any truth in these stories is anyone's guess. By definition, the only way any evidence of such an 'Exo House' could survive the restructuring of causality would be in the form of fiction”

- *Entry on Exo Houses, Mother Thamesmede (The Book of the Truce)*

The Hussar strode into the hold with his cutlass drawn. He found Anne sitting on a throne, pointing her pistol directly at him.

“What's going on?” he asked. “The Kraken detected some sort of local abnormality. What's happened? Are you all right, my dear? Where are the crew?”

“On your knees,” said Anne.

The Hussar snorted scornfully. “What is this?” he wondered.

“Drop your sword,” ordered Anne, emphasizing that she meant business by jabbing the air with her gun. “And get down on your knees!”

He sighed and tossed the blade on to the floor, then slowly sank to his knees.

“Put your hands behind your back,” said Anne, climbing to her feet.

The Hussar did as he was told. His breathing became slightly deeper and the corners of his painted mouth twitched expectantly.

Bonny stalked towards him, slapping the tricorn from his head. She

pressed the pistol to his temple and undid the buttons of his jacket with her free hand. She tugged the jacket over his shoulders, securing his arms behind him.

Then she slapped him, hard across the face.

"You have been lying to me!" she screamed.

"What are you taking about?" laughed the Hussar.

Anne smacked the butt of her pistol ferociously onto his forehead. He yelled in surprise and pain and she thrust the barrel of the gun into his open mouth.

"Laugh at me again and I'll blow your despicable head from your shoulders!" she yelled, cocking the pistol and poking it further down his throat. He blinked the tears of pain from his eyes and choked violently.

"You promised me," she whispered. "You promised me that you were mine to do with as I pleased. You swore that you belonged to me. You made me a promise and when you made that promise, you neglected to mention was that you were already bound to another!"

The Hussar narrowed his eyes in confusion.

"I have been told that your... *House*, your family, still sponsor you," Anne went on. "This life of piracy we live is an illusion. We take what we want, only when permitted to do so. Is that the case? I warn you, you had better now speak the truth! You understand me!? Do not think I will not kill you right here and now if I even suspect that you are lying!"

The Hussar coughed, swallowed and nodded. He understood.

Anne slowly removed the gun from his mouth, but kept it trained on his face.

He cleared his throat, spat gun-oil and then mumbled sheepishly, "I don't know who you have been speaking to, but it's not exactly like you say."

"Then explain," she said. "How is it? *Exactly*."

“We must always proceed with caution,” he replied. “The Homeworld is too preoccupied by the War to have any real interest in our activities. But that is only because we are careful not to draw their attention.”

“You're just another gutless dog,” sneered Anne. “Just like Jim, like Calico Jack. Spineless. Pathetic.”

“Where has all this come from?” he asked. “Who have you been speaking to, my love?”

“I am not your love!” she hissed, kicking him in the chest, sending him flying backwards onto the floor. “I thought you were different! I thought I was finally free! To do as I pleased!”

“You are,” groaned the Hussar, writhing, winded, on the floor. “Anne, please!”

She brought her foot down on his neck. “I can do whatever I want?” she screamed. “You will do whatever I say?”

“Yessss,” he said. He tried to pull his arms free, but they were trapped beneath him. Anne applied more pressure to his throat.

“Whatever the consequences!?” she said. “Whether your family approve or not!?”

He nodded vigorously.

“Swear it!” she said.

“I swear,” he gurgled.

She removed her foot from his throat, clipping his chin with her boot as she did so. He rolled back gasping for breath. She dropped her gun on the deck and brushed her hair from her eyes.

“Good boy,” she said then stooped down to undo his britches.

He was already rigid. Anne struggled out of her own leggings and mounted him roughly. She slid him inside herself and rode him hard as he fought for air. His arms were crushed, painfully behind him from the weight of both of their bodies, smashing together.

His painted face contorted. Anne threw back her head roared. They

synchronized. Time ceased.

Then, she crashed on top of him, slumping into her satisfaction. They lay there, panting together, woozy with pleasure, wincing with pain.

Eventually, Anne lifted her head from the Hussar's chest. She stroked his forehead gently and kissed the bridge of his nose.

“We can do anything we want,” she whispered.

“Anything,” he agreed.

“We can go to see Father Christèmas,” she said.

His eyes flicked open, dark with purple fleck, sobered by the realization. He stared into Anne's cold, green, obstinate glare and cursed his condition.

She was his and he was hers.

Chapter Twenty Five: The New Adventures of Rupert

“Beside him lay his staff of yew
With withered willow twined,
His scant grey hair all wet with dew,
His cheeks with grief ybrined,
And his cry it was ever, alack!
Alack, and woe is me!”

- *Poor Old Pilgrim Misery (T. Lovell Beddoes, 1803-1846)*

He stared at his hands. Stared through his hand. Beyond his hands.

The dirt.

He had scrambled up the shifting gravel incline. Crying, curled himself behind the boulder.

The fear was solid. It filled his core like a second skeleton. He was clogged with fear.

He was more fear than anything else.

What was he?

The devil was coming. It roared at him. It didn't say his name.

He pushed his fingers into his ears as far as they would go, but he could not block the screeching.

He screwed up his eyes, but his eyelids failed. Hell remained in sharp focus. Acres of grey rock and dread. Memories of misery spread in all directions. Past, present, future, forever. Now as then as will be as always.

He wailed in despair and the devil heard him.

Its great hooves stomped the gravel. The crunch of deathless rock. Closer.

Too much fear. Fear weighed him to the ground. Hobbled him. Froze him in one phobic moment. He peeled back his useless lids. Cold salt tears streamed down his quivering, cowering face.

The spear on the ground.

Was it his?

He remembered it.

The world sloped toward this wooden stick. A deranged geometry. He had had it.

The devil was almost upon him.

It was the devil's spear. He had stolen it. Take it. Use it. Slay the devil. End the misery.

The devil was behind the boulder. It screeched once more, the air vibrating with abhorrence.

Take the spear.

He reached out. His hand was tiny, jittering like a moth's wing. His arm abnormally uncurled, stretched far into the distance. He sobbed, sick with despondence. It was impossible. Nothing was possible. Ever. All was sorrow, an infinite obliterating sorrow.

The devil stood before him, blotting out the sky. It folded its tree-trunk arms across its mountainous torso, tilting its horrible head.

It screamed. "What are you doing down there, you twat!"

He shook his head at the beast, shuddering wildly. He mouthed silent pleas for mercy. Covered his wet face with tiny, transparent hands.

The devil sighed, "Pull yourself together!" it bellowed. "You've got important work to do!"

It reached down from the sky and plucked the great stick from the dirt. It thrust the spear towards him.

He screamed, screwing up his eyes, his face, inviting death to end this unbearable torment.

"Here, moron," said the devil. "Take this. Get on with it!"

The devil grabbed his wrist. He squealed like a child as the monster

pushed the stick against his palm. He grabbed it involuntarily, grasping for anything to drag himself out from this unholy pit.

The devil released his wrist.

He yelped in surprise to find his shaking hand clutching a pencil.

It was the most terrifying thing he had ever seen.

"Pick up the pad," said the devil, pointing to the ground.

He pleaded, but the devil would have no truck with his tears.

He cast his eyes downwards and spied the terrible shape. The empty space. The barren, white field that spread before him like some negative grave. For him to fall into. For him to fill with himself. His awful thoughts. To share his misery. To infect the world.

"Look," said the devil. "You've really got to pull yourself together, you know. Remember what we're doing here."

No, he would not remember. He dare not. What despicable thing were they about?

This monster, its head a grinning skull in aspic.

Himself, the source of all that is wretched, weeping in a hellish wasteland.

"Cousin," said the devil. "You promised the Godmother. What would she say if she saw you like this?"

The Godmother.

She.

Could there be purpose within this purgatory?

That would require hope and hope was alien to him. A delusion. A myth.

"You're here to do a job," the devil reminded him. "So, get on with it."

He had to record this misery for the Godmother. Encode the dread and the hopeless terrain. Create a world for her to use.

To tame the devil.

Dare he hope? What new waves of torment would accompany such a hope? It could not drive him any deeper, surely?

His withered soul detached itself from his body, now a grey husk. It rained through his eyes, his mouth, the pores of his skin, upon the empty space spread out below, filling it with his unfiltered misery.

He had only just begun.

He began to scream.

Chapter Twenty Six: Business On Eris

"The breaking the siege of Eris was the turning point in the cymbiont revolution. The uprising on Eris had been far less convivial than that on Pluto. It had been the bloodshed on Eris that had led to the Company's negotiations with Sojourner Hooper-Agogô, the instigator of cymbiont unrest on Pluto.

What first seemed like appeasement was in fact a cunning act of brinkmanship on Hooper-Agogô's part. No sooner had the ink dried on the Plutonic Cymbiont Bill of Rights, than a hidden cymbiont fleet arrived to intercept the Company's siege armada, who were taken completely by surprise.

Eris's revolutionary forces, led by non-cymbiont, Michael K Spaceman, were emboldened by Hooper-Agogô's audacity. From that moment on, the Company's security overheads in the Plutonic worlds became unsustainable and the cymbiont revolution was complete."

- Technosapience: An Introduction (Dr M Banks, 50^9 7029)

The Felicitation **disengaged its warp engine, spacetime unrumpled itself from around the hull and the ship decelerated.**

They were now only a few hundred-thousand kilometres away from their destination. Eris was haloed with light from its artificial sun, peeking from the far side of the world. A flotilla of ships broadcast messages of greeting to the Lady President, along with a welcoming fanfare and revised guidance coordinates.

The great vessel returned greetings, sliding open its bay doors and releasing its cargo of security ships as a cloud of glinting metal darts. The tiny craft spread out, taking an elaborate display formation around *the Felicitation,* **their lights strobing through the visible spectrum in a nimbus of violent colour.**

L-Event stood exposed to the vacuum, secured magnetically to the bay floor. The mammoth found the deep-cold bracing and the view of the void from the open doors on either side did wonders for personal perspective.

Inside the howdah, Sojourner shared the elephant's experience,

throwing on a jacket in a bid to combat the cold which her body wasn't currently feeling. Mason was speaking via communicator to his opposite number, the assistant to Eris's Prime Minister, Falala Munk.

Munk was a striking, olive-skinned woman with dark, lustrous hair. Mason, in full PA mode, had set his charm to the highest possible level and Munk had clearly done the same. It was a duel of intense affability.

Sojourner shifted her attention from the pair, pretending to be engrossed in her admin. In reality, she basked in the cleansing nothingness of space, awarded her by L-Event's myriad of sensors. This was her last chance for idling before her time belonged to others.

The Felicitation **banked left, meeting the welcoming flotilla on the edge of the planet's exosphere. It was a rag-tag fleet mainly consisting of commercial and industrial craft with a smattering of security ships spread throughout. They flashed their lights and beamed greeting signals.**

Preparing for re-entry, the huge presidential craft sealed its doors and dipped its prow into the upper atmosphere. The ship's shields instantly reacted to the pressure, strengthening themselves as the temperature around the hull soared.

"We have had a minor problem with the weather," admitted Falala Munk, on L-Event's holo-screen. "There will be a touch of drizzle when the Lady President arrives, I am afraid. Our top meteorologists are working flat out to correct this little climate glitch and we hope this won't detract from her enjoyment at all."

"Oh, Falala," hushed Mason. "The Lady President is not going to be phased by a little rain. She takes the weather as she finds it. Our ETA is now four minutes. We look forward to speaking to you face-to-face very shortly."

"Likewise, Mason," said Falala and disappeared from the screen.

Sojourner rolled her eyes. When had people started worrying about what style of weather she preferred?

The Felicitation **dropped through the clouds and Enyo, the capital city of Eris, revealed itself. The metropolis reached out from a massive,**

man-made crater, constructed over time, as the planet was mined. As the spires of Enyo had climbed, its foundations had crept ever deeper into a concave, circular valley.

The ship came to rest on the vast landing platform, suspended above several skyscrapers. The accompanying security ships settled in a crescent around the presidential vessel. The bay doors slid open, the ramp extended and L-Event wandered out.

A small group of well-wishers were there to greet them, the public parade planned for later in the visit. Sojourner would have a few hours to rest and acclimatize herself to the rhythms of Eris.

“Welcome, Lady President!” boomed the Prime Minister.

Mick Spaceman threw his arms around Sojourner and lifted her off the ground.

“Good to see you, Mick,” mumbled the President from beneath the bear hug.

Spaceman was a mountain of a man. His skin was taut and pasty, with many scars and callouses. His head was like a block of gristle, with a squashed, broken nose and cauliflower ears. People could have been wary of Spaceman's appearance, were it not for the fact that his smile was always warm and generous, if somewhat toothless.

“A shame Rex and the kids couldn't come,” he said, placing the President back on her feet.

“They send their love,” Sojourner replied. She glanced over to where Mason and Falala were discussing the minutiae of the itinerary. Robots were ferrying luggage from L-Event into a nearby elevator.

“You look a bit peaky, Sojo,” said Mick.

“Just tired,” she replied.

“You go and freshen up,” said the Prime Minister. “Have a few hours kip. The public are going to keep you busy over the next couple of days.”

Leaving L-Event on the platform to sync-up with the local network, Sojourner was escorted to her suite, several levels below. The suite was

a comfortable series of rooms, consisting of a modest reception area, a master bedroom with a panoramic view of the city and a compact en suite bathroom.

Mason made arrangements to meet the President later, in time for her first engagement, before disappearing to his own room to continue his planning with Falala.

Sojourner shut the door, bolted it and rested her forehead on its cool surface.

She screwed her eyes tight. Her breathing became shallow. She gritted her teeth, holding back the anger that threatened to release a scream of defiance that could shatter the world.

Then L-Event was there, in the foundation of her mind, bolstering her. Support and encouragement flowed through her.

Sojourner's eyes snapped open. She stood upright, squared her shoulders and inhaled deeply. Turning and walking into the reception room, she spied the connecting door to the next suite and moved towards it deliberately.

She clenched her fist and lifted it to knock.

The door opened before her knuckles connected.

“Lady President,” said Father Christèmas. “So glad you could make it. May I get you a drink?”

Chapter Twenty Seven: Meet the Gang

"'Displaced Confidence' is a psychological phenomenon first theorized by Dr. Herbert Schtucker of the University of Phobos in the late classical human period.

He interviewed and documented meetings with over a thousand chronologically displaced humans, post-humans and sundry other species, some even purporting to be members of Great Houses, Faction Paradox and one or two other disparate War powers operatives, including the Enemy themselves. This profiling, whilst incomplete, did present several interesting observations.

Chronologically displaced individuals, it appeared, have a small, subconscious boost in personal confidence purely from being displaced. This phenomena increases when said individuals come into contact with other similarly displaced individuals.'

- *Entry on Displaced Confidence, Mother Thamesmede (The Book of the Truce)*

The room was in semi darkness.

To Sojourner's left, Chantelle sat at a breakfast bar, smoking. She was dressed in a black vest, leggings and boots and there was a half full flute of champagne next to her. She stared at Sojourner with no flicker of a greeting.

On the far side of the room, a couch was filled with an entwined and sprawling couple: a man and a woman dressed in flamboyant, open shirts, tight trousers and riding boots. The woman was pale with cascading scarlet tresses. The man well built, with a fake tan and shoulder length, black hair that was decorated with an occasional beaded braid.

Sojourner could tell immediately that this man was Great Houses.

The pair paid her no attention, too engrossed with themselves, whispering and chuckling at their own private jokes. They were draped over each other in the overly demonstrative manner of first-time teenaged lovers, but their uncomfortably perfect appearance betrayed the fact they were the most ancient things in the room.

To their right, Father Christèmas was at the drinks cabinet. He was bald, white and wiry in a black shirt and red, crushed velvet suit. He appeared to be around the same age as Sojourner and not at all what she had expected.

On first impressions, she trusted him about as far as she could spit, but he didn't appear to be anything even vaguely like his reputation. He at least *seemed* like someone she might be able to do business with.

"We're all on the champagne," said Christèmas, clanking the bottles in the cabinet. "But, we've got everything here. What do you fancy?"

"Champagne is fine," said Sojourner.

Christèmas grinned and invited her to take a seat.

Choosing the arm chair where Christèmas had obviously been sitting before her arrival, Sojourner sat, crossed her legs, steepled her fingers and waited to be served.

Christèmas brought the drink over, carrying his own in his other hand.

"Just put it down on the table, thank you," said the President as he passed her the flute.

Chantelle looked at Christèmas. The couple on the couch did the same.

"Of course," said Christèmas, setting the champagne down on the coffee table in front of Sojourner. He swigged from his own glass and remained standing.

A second passed.

"So!" boomed Christèmas, dramatically. "Introductions! Let's see... Everyone knows Chantelle over there, say 'hi' Chaz, and I am Father Christèmas, *obviously*, but you can all call me Chris, if you like."

He gestured towards Sojourner, "Our new arrival here. Just in from Pluto, we have the recently elected Lady President of the Plutonic Republic Of Technosapien Enhanced Cultures, the artist formerly known as Cousin Ceol, Sojourner Hooper-Agogô! Say hello, Sojo!"

The Lady President remained silent.

Chris cleared his throat, then continued. “The gentleman over there, on the sofa, is known as 'The Hussar'. He's...”

“Great Houses,” Sojourner cut in.

The Hussar looked up, finally acknowledging that Sojourner was present. He gazed at her and raised a self-satisfied eyebrow. “You've heard of me?” he asked.

“No,” said the President. “You just reek of the Houseworld.”

“The Hussar is here as an independent party,” Chris interjected, diplomatically. “Just like you and me, Madam President.”

“It is true. I am originally of the Homeworld,” declared the Hussar to the President. “It is also true that I am now a renegade of independent means. Although, if I may add, Father Christèmas, whilst most of what you say is correct, I must stress that I am neither 'like' you or 'like'... *her*.”

He wafted a disdainful index finger at Sojourner.

The red-headed woman cackled at the retort.

Sojourner smiled and raised her voice to be heard over the mocking laughter. “And you are..?” she asked the Hussar's snickering companion.

The laughter stopped dead.

“Lady President,” Father Christèmas announced, “may I present, direct from the Golden Age of Piracy, the Scourge of the Seven Seas herself, the infamous, Ms Anne Bonny!”

Sojourner nodded, “Oh, I *have* heard of you,” the president admitted. “I remember you from some dumb video game my little brother used to play, back in the day.” She wrinkled her nose. “I would have expected you to look a bit more... *realistic* in real life...”

Anne screwed up her face and went to leap from her seat, but the Hussar held her back. Sojourner noticed from the corner of her eye that Chantelle had tensed and was immediately ready in intervene,

should she have been required to do so.

The Lady President did not flinch.

Father Christèmas stepped forward, holding out conciliatory hands. "Let's just dial this back a touch. Shall we, ladies?" he suggested. His manner was still easy, but the attrition of his guests' heated exchanges had exposed a more resolute layer to Chris's temperament.

Elsewhere, L-Event osmosed information and considered.

Sojourner leaned forward, plucked her flute from the table and took a sip of champagne.

Anne ground her teeth, but allowed the Hussar to placate her with stroking hands and gentle kisses.

"Right," said Chris, placing his empty glass on the table with a clink. "Now that we have established everyone's credentials, I am sure you are all dying to know the nature of the undertaking for which we are all gathered here today."

"We're robbing someone, aren't we?" grumbled Anne.

Father Christèmas winced.

"Ms Bonny," he said, blinking his lashless eyes, slowly and deliberately. "What we are … *acquiring* … is something that had already been stolen from *us*."

"Which is?" asked Sojourner.

"Our *potential*," Chris replied.

Chapter Twenty Eight: Mystery History

"Urquineath, the maven house of inconsequence, charge of trivialities and the 2nd Second, holder of naught, most minor of minors, fellowship of knowing itself as is, coeval to history, bloodline of the Homeworld."

- *Only official reference to the 2nd Second, The Indices of the Great Houses*

Chantelle tapped her data pad and a holographic image resolved in the air above the coffee table. The image was of a brass disc, roughly half a metre in diameter, suspended in an intricate metal cradle, not dissimilar to a dinner gong.

The disc was ornate and engraved in concentric symbols that may have been some sort of language. On closer examination, the symbols revealed themselves to be fractal, the more the details were examined, the more details there were to see.

"Does anyone recognize this item?" asked Chris.

"Well, it's Great Houses," said Sojourner.

"Indeed," said Chris, "Hussar?"

"I have no idea," said the Hussar.

"What does it say?" asked Sojourner.

"How should I know?" snorted the Hussar. "It's a museum piece."

"It is a very early Houseworld language," Chris admitted. "The earliest recorded. It's from around the time of the Anchoring."

"What's '*the Anchoring***'?" said Bonny.**

"The beginning of history," muttered the Hussar.

"Not *strictly* **true that, is it, Hussar?" said Sojourner.**

"The Anchoring of the Thread," explained Father Christèmas, "Refers to the point where the Great Houses defined the physical laws of the universe as we know them today. From the Houseworld orthodoxy's point of view, it *is* **'The Beginning of History'. However,**

there were events *prior* to the Anchoring, which brings us back to the object you see before you."

"What is it, then?" said Anne.

"Anyone ever heard of 'The 2nd Second'?" asked Christèmas.

There came no reply.

"Doesn't surprise me," said Chris. "It's a pretty obscure legend based on a few, disparate facts. The story goes that just before the Great Houses tamed the chaos of the 'old times' with their laws, they had last minute doubts. What if they'd missed something? What if, once they introduced their checks and balances, that causality didn't behave in the way they had predicted?

There would be no going back, because there was no *where* to go back *to*. The Anchoring would over-write everything that had gone before. There would be no 'before'.

The Major Houses were confident enough to just brazen it out. But, enough Minor Houses were concerned that they hatched a contingency, on the quiet. A small sliver of 'old time' was stored, on a disc, like this," he pointed at the floating image.

"It's called a temporeliquary. They used it as a sort of cosmic 'save point', just in case anything went awry. It contains just the tiniest smidge of time."

"The 2nd Second," said Sojourner.

Chris nodded, "It was more symbolic than anything else. As we all know, the Great Houses' plan worked perfectly and eventually everyone forgot that there had ever been a contingency. So, this minor relic ended up gathering dust on a shelf in some forgotten corner of some not-so-great Great House."

"Which House?" asked the Hussar.

"House... *Urquineath*, wasn't it, Chaz?" asked Chris.

Chaz checked her data pad and nodded.

The Hussar ran his fingers through his hair. "I don't recognize the

name...” he said.

“You wouldn't,” Chris replied. “They were always small time. The whole bloodline went into decline, long before House Paradox appeared. Which is how the temporeliquary came into the Chance Coteries' possession.

“Someone from House Urquineath was raiding the family silver. They gambled it away at Serendipity Keep. Just shows you what a rubbish House they were, doesn't it? Access to time-travel, but still completely shit at gambling.”

“But, the Coteries don't deal with time actives,” said Sojourner.

“They don't *anymore*,” stressed Christèmas. “This was proper early doors, Sojo. Things were different before the De Rein dynasty took over and signed the Neam treaty with Faction Paradox.”

“I'm not following any of this!” grumbled Anne.

“Yeah, sorry,” muttered Chris, “We're drifting from the point, aren't we? The upshot is this - Serendipity Keep has the 2nd Second. I want it. The Neam treaty prevents me from getting it legitimately, so I have settled for retrieving it *illegitimately* instead.”

Chris nodded to Chaz, who tapped her data pad and replaced the holo-image with a transparent rendering of Serendipity Keep. Beneath the Keep was a massive sublevel, cordoned into sections.

The central section flashed red.

“The temporeliquary is stored within an axiomatic vault,” Christèmas explained. “The vault is housed beneath the Keep, within a tesseract belonging to the Keep's AI. This area contains the AI's subconscious servers...”

“Oh, for pity's sake!” snapped the Hussar, “This is absurd!”

Bonny was becoming increasingly vexed. She had imagined this new stage in their career would be the stimulation that had so long been lacking from her life. It was proving to be nothing of the sort. She was desperate to know what everyone was talking about, but she would be damned if she were to demand another explanation so soon.

“What's an axiomatic vault?” asked Sojourner, finding herself, against her better nature, amused by Anne's obvious discomfort.

“The AI's subconscious is essentially a wildly unstable tract of pseudo-space,” Christèmas told her, his hands twirling in demonstration. “It's impossible to chart a course through it. Anything entering just becomes more grist to the AI's mill. If you set foot inside, you are dismantled instantly. Not just on a physical level, but on a *notional* **level too. You become part of the AI's subconscious processes. Recycled into thought and energy. Same goes for anything.**

**** *Except*, **anything housed within an axiomatic vault. In simple terms, the axiomatic vault is a box made of certainty locked in a room constructed of ambiguities.”**

“So, how are you expected to reach it!?” barked the Hussar.

“Ah, my dear Hussar,” said Father Christèmas, a grin uncurling across his face. “That is the clever bit.”

Chapter Twenty Nine: Poetic Injustice

“Hark to the echo of Time's footsteps, gone

These moments are into the unseen grave

Of ages. Thy have vanished nameless. None,

While they are deep under the eddying wave

Of the chaotic past, shall place a stone

Sacred to these, the nurses of the brave,”

- *A Clock Striking Midnight (T. Lovell Beddoes, 1803-1846)*

Harry's phone was ringing.

He tutted, opened a door in his chest, reached inside and lifted the receiver to his ear.

“Yes?” he said.

“Harry?” crackled a faint, questioning voice.

“Of course it's me!” snapped Haribeaux.

“This line is terrible,” said the crackle. “Where are you?”

“In the universe next door.”

“Ah. How's it going?”

“He's accepted the payload.”

“Great!”

“He's been screaming for over an hour.”

“Ah.”

“He's been writing a bit too.”

“So, it's working?”

“Seems so. God, I hate the Romantics.”

“Heh! You've no soul, Haribeaux!”

“Just because I have no time for morbid, whining pricks, doesn't mean I have no soul,” muttered Harry.

“I'm going to go,” said the crackle. “I can barely hear you.”

“I'll let you know when we're done,” said Harry and hung up.

Christèmas put his phone back in his pocket and listened to Chantelle wind up her profile of the mark. The holographic display now carried an image of Scacia De Rein.

Chaz had outlined the basics. De Rein had been the most successful Indeterminatrix in Serendipity Keep's history. The Keep's sect was the most lucrative of all the Chance Coteries, with devotees numbering in their billions.

“The secret of De Rein's success is twofold,” said Chris. “Outwardly, she appears easy going, progressive, even liberal. She was instrumental in the cymbiont equality movement, outing her own technological enhancement by way of Teardrop, her dynamic polyalloyed companion and her connection to the Keep's AI. Teardrop is, essentially, the physical manifestation of the AI.

“De Rein loves music. She adores poetry. She's charming, compassionate and the perfect dinner guest.

“But, don't let any of these things fool you. De Rein's faith is absolute. The accumulation of capital is her sacred duty. Each card game is a prayer. Every dice, a rosary bead.”

“So, what's our play?” asked Sojourner.

“You've received your invitation to the party,” said Chris. “Chaz and Anne will be your plus two. Chaz as your PA and Anne as your bodyguard. You will take with you a birthday present. A folio of poetry by the also-ran, latter day Romantic, Thomas Lovell Beddoes.

As I said, De Rein is big on poetry. The folio will contain a piece unique to that particular anthology. An original Lovell Beddoes, written specifically for the occasion. I have a colleague who is supervising the poet as we speak.

The poem will contain a meme, attuned to the Keep's AI. Once the meme is introduced, it will home in on the vault and construct a bubble of certainty around it."

"Won't that be detectable?" said the Hussar.

Christèmas shook his head. "It only lasts a few seconds, then dissolves back into ambiguity. Totally untraceable, unless you know it's there."

"Yee have t'be quick, like," added Chantelle. "Job itsel teks aboot two an' a half seconds."

"Which is why we use the Kraken for extraction," Chris explained.

"I am not comfortable with Anne and I being separated," said the Hussar.

Sojourner looked at Anne expecting fireworks. She was not disappointed.

Anne had been listening more intently at the first mention of her name in a context she understood, that of a bodyguard. The finer points of the rest of the plan were a loss to her, but she was enjoying imagining herself as the protector of the key to the vault.

Then the Hussar said what he had said. Anne Bonny saw red.

"Do you think I cannot function without you?" she hissed.

"Not at all my dear," protested her paramour.

"It is more likely that *you* cannot function without *me* then!?" Anne continued.

"I..." spluttered the Hussar, uncertain of the correct response.

"I'll look after him, Anne," promised Christèmas, quietly amused at the Hussar's discomfort.

Bonny disentangled herself from her partner and scooted up the couch, away from the Hussar's embrace. "Father Christèmas," she announced, "You may do what you like with him! I am my own council. Tell me more of my position as bodyguard. Am I likely to have to kill any of De Rein's men?"

Christèmas shook his head. “Your team shouldn't end up engaging at all,” he stressed. “There will be tournaments as part of the celebrations, if you feel like you need to keep your hand in though, Anne.”

Sojourner sipped her champagne.

Taking Christèmas' plan at face value, it appeared that she was just a courier. Using Chantelle as her PA was reasonable, she didn't want Mason involved in any of this and if anyone got suspicious of the swap, it was conceivable that Mason would have objected to accompanying her to De Rein's celebrations anyway. With a bit of luck she might even be able to engineer his resignation. She could always reinstate him once the job was done.

Anne Bonny as her bodyguard?

That didn't feel right. The woman was clearly a liability, historical celebrities so often were. Maybe Christèmas just needed the Hussar, but Bonny came as an unwanted part of the package.

Sojourner felt eyes on her.

Christèmas was still buttering up Bonny. The Hussar looked on, like an abandoned puppy.

It was Chantelle that was staring at the president.

Chaz had abandoned her glass and was now swigging champagne from the bottle. Sojourner returned the stare, adding a 'what you looking at?' sneer.

Chaz flicked her eyes to Anne then back to Sojourner. The merest hint of a smile threatened to crease the corners of Chantelle's mouth.

After a moment, Sojourner took her cousin's meaning. They had both been thinking the same thing. They were being lumbered with this loose cannon, a sociopathic pirate queen. Delivering the present was only half of the job description. The rest of the time they were expected to babysit Anne Bonny.

The Lady President nodded in understanding. Then a thought occurred that concerned her more.

Whilst she was disturbed by the prospect of delivering a Trojan horse to one of the most powerful women in post-humanity, accompanied by a homicidal woman from ancient history, what really disturbed her, above all else was at some point in her recent past, she had started to think of Chantelle as her cousin.

Chapter Thirty: Leaving Things Behind

"The cymbiont revolution had repercussions in unexpected places. The sea change in technosapien opinion and understanding effected many cultures, some identifying oppressive parallels within their own sphere, others in a more superficial sense.

Wealthy socialites, celebrities and cultural icons across the entirety of post-humanity embraced what they saw as the novelty of technological augmentation. technosapiens became aspirational figures. Identifying with the cymbiont struggle to be recognised as equals, it offered a veneer of authenticity to the cosseted rich and indolent.

The old image of cold, cybernetic marauders and anti-emotion equilibrists were depictions from a dreary and unfashionable past. Technosapience had shifted from anti-culture to counter-culture and was accelerating, unstoppably, into a myriad of new subcultures, transforming the posthuman condition forever."

- Technosapience: An Introduction (Dr M Banks, 50^9 7029)

"She's *what?***" snapped Mick Spaceman.**

"Keep your voice down, Prime Minister," hissed Falala. "Mason mentioned it earlier. Apparently she hasn't made up her mind yet, but she is definitely considering attending."

"Has she gone crazy?"

The Prime Minister of Eris and his PA were in an informal huddle at the Lady President's reception. It was a modest function in an open plan office space, with wine and canapés and Spaceman's immediate circle of ministers and secretaries. They were there to small-talk and regroup before the public celebrations began, later that evening.

Sojourner Hooper-Agogô had yet to arrive.

Spaceman puffed on his vape-stick thoughtfully. What was Sojo playing at? Falala Munk had the expression of a school child telling tales. It was not like her or Mason to be so indiscreet. This was not some misunderstanding. Sojourner was seriously considering attending the Serendipity Keep anniversary festival.

His Lady President would be seen to curtsey to the Indeterminatrix.

“No,” said Spaceman, bluntly. “This is *not* going to happen.”

“You need to keep your cool, Prime Minister,” said Falala, wondering whether it had been wise to mention this information in the first place. “I am sure that I don't have to remind you how the Lady President reacts to demands and ultimatums?”

Spaceman wasn't listening. He chewed the end of his vape-stick like an irritable bulldog.

Agogô’s bells rang in earnest. The president had arrived with Mason in tow. Sojourner waved from the threshold of the room. Mason led the applause and the whole room followed. The Lady President nodded appreciatively, then glided into the room, heading directly to the Prime Minister, who she kissed on both cheeks.

“What you playing at, Sojo?” he whispered.

“I'm only five minutes late,” Sojourner protested.

“That's not what I mean,” said Mick. “This Chance Coteries business.”

“My goodness! News travels fast, doesn't it?” Sojourner replied, giving Falala a hard stare as the PA handed her a glass of wine and retired to a safe distance.

“Bad news travels especially quick,” growled Spaceman. “Why are you even considering it?”

“Do we have to discuss this now?” hissed Sojourner through a forced grin.

“You bet we do!” boomed the Prime Minister.

Sojourner grabbed Spaceman's elbow and ushered him to the far side of the room, out of earshot of the rest of the attendees, who ducked their heads at the outburst and diplomatically concerned themselves with things as far away from the two heads of state as was possible.

“I haven't even made up my mind yet!” Sojourner lied when they were far enough away.

“Were you going to discuss it with me before you did?” snapped Mick, his eyes searching hers for reassurance.

“Probably,” she exaggerated.

“This is *not* going to happen,” Spaceman stressed.

“Wait a minute,” said Sojourner, “You don't tell *me* what is or is not going to happen! *I* tell *you*!”

“Look...” said Spaceman.

“No, *you* look, Mick!” she hissed, cutting him dead, her fake grin twisting into a grimace. “When have my decisions *ever* been for anything other than the greater good, eh? During the strikes, the riots, the siege. When the play seemed risky or impossible or even fucking life-threatening, when did you *ever* doubt me?”

“Never.”

“Then don't start now!”

This was it.

This was the moment when she laid out her entire reputation for Father Christèmas to shit all over. She was threatening another one of her dearest friends and staunchest allies and lying about the reason, pretending it was for the good of the Republic.

She felt sick to her marrow.

Spaceman looked away, slowly shaking his head and puffing at his vape-stick with exasperation.

Sojourner rested a consolatory hand on Mick's elbow.

“If it were anyone else,” mumbled Mick, unable to look at her.

“I know.”

“*Anyone* else!” he snapped, his eyes finally falling on hers. She blinked from the intensity of his accusatory glare. Spaceman's china-blue psycho-stare was infamous, but this was the first time Sojourner had been on the receiving end. She was grateful that Mick was her friend.

“One thing,” he said. “I don't care about diplomacy or protocol or any of that shit. Whatever the consequences, you will *not* curtsey to Scacia De Rein under *any* circumstances. Understand?”

“Prime Minister,” Sojourner declared, “I am *your* Lady President.” She gave his granite face a short, affectionate slap.

“I don't fucking curtsey to *anyone*.”

Chapter Thirty One: Regret Something You Have Done

"So, if you see lines in the sky,

that block the mountain's summit,

All kinds of woe, you stub your toe,

the Faction are what done it."

- *The Faction Done It (traditional)*

Rupert held his head in his hands.

Despite how broken he felt, huddled in the dirt, he was grateful that his head was now attached to his body, at least. Some semblance of normality was returning to his thought processes. He was still conscious of the sound of his every breath, but the noise no longer resonated with the profundity of the previous few hours.

His hair and clothes were drenched with tepid sweat that smelled sharp and artificial. A thin, gritty film coated the surface of his papery skin and his mouth was sore and gluey. He tried to spit the caustic taste from his tongue, but there was insufficient moisture.

The crunch of gravel heralded the return of Haribeaux.

"Here," said Harry. "Take this."

"What is it?" Rupert croaked.

"A drink."

Rupert held out his hand. He was still unable to lift his head. Harry placed the drink in his hand. It was cold against his palm and he could feel bubbles bursting against the inside of the glass. He brought the drink down to his eye level. The glass was filled with a pink, fizzy liquid, topped with ice and a neon-green curly straw.

Rupert sucked the straw. The taste was like heaven. The icy cold liquid was loaded with sugar and the flavour was tart, rich and citrus. He gulped greedily, almost draining the glass completely before coming up for air.

“Oh, my god,” he gasped, “That tastes incredible! What is it?”

“Loganberryade,” said Harry. “My own recipe. Your blood sugar is shot to shit. That should help to level you off a bit. “

“Thank you,” said Rupert. “Was the experiment a success?”

“It was,” said Haribeaux. “Everything is going according to plan.”

“So, I really made the difference?” said Rupert finally, lifting his head and squinting in the grey light. “Blue Praxis works? It's actually viable?”

“There's no such thing as Blue Praxis,” said Harry.

Rupert paused as his eyes grew more accustomed to the light. Haribeaux was now a blur, towering before him. “Sorry,” said Rupert. “What did you just say?”

“There's no such thing as Blue Praxis,” Harry reiterated. “We lied. We made it up. I think Antigone suspected as much, didn't she?”

Rupert let the information sink in for a moment, then nodded.

“Doesn't matter now, anyway,” said Harry. “You've done your job. The wheels are in motion.”

“What?” said Rupert, the fear creeping back for an encore. “What have I done? What 'wheels'? If there is no Blue Praxis, what was that stuff you gave me? What did you do to me!?”

“Oh, shut up,” moaned Haribeux. “You just had a little taster from my dessert menu. Bonbons de temps - a work I am particularly proud of. You were an artist in a previous life too, weren't you? A poet?”

Rupert was taken aback. How did Haribeaux know this?

“I... was,” he admitted, “Not a very good one...”

“Yeah, I read some,” Harry agreed. “It was shit. Fortunately, I am slightly more skilled in my chosen discipline. My bonbons shuffled your biodata a little. You spent the last few hours slaving over a new composition, but the finished piece emerged from the pen of your *past* life.”

“Composition?” mumbled Rupert, images of himself screaming and dragging a pencil across paper flashing before his eyes.

“It slotted, seamlessly into the history of your work,” Haribeaux explained. “And now it is waiting to be activated by the right sort of reader.”

“What do you mean, 'activated'?” said Rupert.

“It contains rather a potent subtext,” Harry replied. “Your heightened senses absorbed all the information of this world around you. You filtered it and encoded it in your work. It worked exactly like I knew it would. It was all too convenient, wasn't it? You. The PROTEC president. They were the tell-tale signs.”

Rupert stared in utter bafflement.

“Somewhere out there,” whispered Haribeaux, his tone rapt and drifting. “Our bastard child of cut-and-shut histories is kicking. That is now inescapable.” Harry stared into the middle distance for some time. He seemed completely oblivious to Rupert's presence for a good five seconds before he snapped out of his daydream and remembered where he was.

“Anyway, shut

up!” bellowed Harry. “You're getting on my nerves now! Finish your drink and get on your feet! We need to brief you on your next task and I've got work to do.”

Rupert drained the remnants of his drink and shakily clambered to his feet. When upright, he wobbled disconcertingly. Haribeaux sighed, grabbed Rupert's elbow and frog-marched him across the grey landscape, back to Bankside and the next phase of the operation.

Cousin Rupert staggered alongside the stomping frame of Cousin Haribeaux. What would the Godmother say? he thought. She had been right all along. But rather than uncovering the truth and returning as the hero of the hour, he had become complicit in some other diabolical scheme.

And then it struck him. He had entered into this compact with Haribeaux of his own volition. Even if he argued it was under duress,

Antigone would not care. In her eyes, he was either inept or corrupt. It would amount to the same thing. He was as guilty as the rest of the Bankside contingent.

He couldn't beat them.

It looked like he had already joined them.

Act III - The Value of Nothing

Chapter Thirty Two: Toys In The Attic

"The Loa are entities made of history. The Great Houses say they do not exist. Faction Paradox say they do. Both are correct, depending on how you look at it.

The Great Houses see history as a quantifiable string of equations, there are no 'ghosts in the machine'. Faction Paradox see history as an ever changing pattern. In the same way figures and shapes can be seen in clouds in the sky, so the Loa can be observed in time.

The Eleven Day Empire is protected by particular Loa. Others are employed in different areas, living in tandem and at a tangent to the Spiral Politic.

The Faction's use of ritual to appease, communicate and bargain with the Loa has been likened to stage-hypnosis. Performance hypnotists are less worried about whether their volunteers are **literally** *mesmerised or are just playing along, either for fun, to avoid embarrassment or just because that is what they are 'supposed to do'.*

If the task is to get someone clucking like a chicken and someone ends up clucking like a chicken, then surely that task has been completed successfully.

There are various means of accessing the Loa and a positive result is a positive result, no matter how it was negotiated or achieved."

- *Entry on Loa Evocation, Godmother Kumo (The Book of the Truce)*

The comet hurtled through silent void, a pebble tossed across the black millpond of space.

On a tiny, deep space probe, sensors registered the comet's proximity. The undetectable speck of a craft moved gently to intercept.

The probe drifted closer, matching the comet's speed. It casually coasted alongside, unnoticed, a washing machine approaching a mountain.

The probe calculated quietly, measuring the comet's rotation, velocity and topography. It sifted the data, checked its findings and made a series of decisions. Sidling ever closer, it identified the most

suitable landing site and slowly settled itself on to the rocky surface.

Only the subtlest disturbance of dust disclosed its arrival.

Checking its systems, the probe found no damage from the landing and proceeded to fulfil its next objective. Spidery legs unfolded, clawed feet hooking into the craggy rock. Detectors fired up. The probe lifted itself to its feet and scuttled off, across the surface of the comet, following a trail of invisible information.

The machine arrived at the edge of a huge, jagged crater. It stretched before the probe as a lake of impenetrable darkness. Tentatively, it dipped a metallic toe into the shadows, found purchase and began its descent into the pit.

The sides were steep and the going slow, but the probe began to close on its target. A kilometre beneath the comet's surface it finally found what it had been searching for.

Under a thick layer of ancient ice lay the frozen carcass of a warship.

The probe began to gather data. The fossilised vessel was two hundred meters long, shaped like an arrowhead and constructed from a complex metal alloy. It had lain under the ice for several thousand years. Finding the most accessible point of entry, the probe cut into the ice with its heat lance and scuttled closer to the craft.

Attaching itself like a tick to the bay doors on the underside of the ship, the probe fired up its heat lance once more, tracing a circle onto the ancient metal, large enough to gain entrance. It took some time for the hull to yield, but eventually, a neat disc of metal fell away and was caught by the probe in one of its many-fingered claws.

Climbing inside, it reattached the disc, sealing the hull, its scanners checking for any sign of compromise. Satisfied with its work, the probe scuttled deeper into the dead ship. It crept through the pitch darkness, its claws slipping occasionally on patches of ancient black frost.

The probe was not alone.

In the dark were row upon row of inanimate figures. Dormant machines laced with deep-frozen flesh. A forgotten battalion of

technosapien marauders. Leftovers from an earlier epoch. Perfectly preserved specimens of *Inanem Magnanime Milites,* the empty-hearted soldiers. An equilibrist sleeper-cell of the interstellar existential struggle.

The warship was like some vast, refrigerated meat-locker. The scuttling box wove its way through the sleeping soldiers, their chilled cadavers threaded with wires and pipes. Bones studded with circuit boards, sealed in plastic and alloy. Blood spiked with performance enhancing chemicals, suspended in frozen veins.

Reaching the command deck, the probe sighted its goal.

The oversized commander was locked into the pilot's seat by a blanket of cabling. Its face, a skull covered by a blank mask of preserving canvas, peered from the mass of wires like some totemic carving on an ivy-covered tree trunk.

The probe shuffled itself into the base of the pile of wiring, disappearing beneath the heap and began to ingratiate itself with the warship's servers. The vessel's dormant operating systems were gutted and junked. The probe supplied new protocols and directives, uploading and installing them with implacable efficiency. The new command programs were booted and placed in standby.

The probe and the ship were one.

A message was sent.

An inconceivably vast distance away, Father Christèmas's mobile phone beeped once. Chris checked his messages and found a text from someone called 'Phil'.

All it contained was a smiley face.

Chapter Thirty Three: Checking Out

"In a way, it is a mistake to think of the representatives of the Great Houses as 'individuals' at all, at least in in the human sense of the word. The bloodlines of the Houseworld are more like a wave of some fundamental universal force than a family tree."

- *The Great Houses And Us (Prof. H. Lennistein, 31,441)"*

In the honeymoon suite, the Hussar sat on the bed, his arms folded across his chest, watching Anne collect all her belongings into a holdall. She was humming a tune and relishing the task that lay ahead. He was pensive and slightly put out at how little Anne was concerned with their imminent separation.

The Hussar watched his muse wander backwards and forwards across the space. He traced the pattern of her path. It wove an appealing shape through his immediate personal history. Beyond that, he could not say. He considered how much he cared, the act of consideration an indication all to itself.

She cast her eyes around the room, searching for anything that she might have missed.

"You left your dagger in the bathroom," he reminded her.

"Oh, yes!" she exclaimed. "Thank you, my darling. I would have been truly vexed to have forgotten that." She ducked into the en suite to fetch the throwing knife.

"You see how you need me to watch your back?" he called after her.

The dagger flew through the bathroom door and embedded itself in the bedstead, three inches from the Hussar's head. He only flinched slightly.

"Oh, are you still grumpy about me going off with the Lady President?" she asked in a patronising tone. Anne wandered back into the room and sat down next to him on the bed. "It's just for a short while. Just long enough for you to think up some new ways to please me on my return."

"You do not fully understand how great a risk we are taking," the

Hussar emphasized. "*Needless* risk."

"It is my will," Anne reminded him. "There is nothing 'needless' about *that*."

"Indeed," said the Hussar, with some reluctance.

"Father Christèmas has said we can name our price for our fee," Anne went on.

"I assume you have got something in mind?" the Hussar asked with a smile.

Anne paused and pouted. "I thought," she said, "That I might like to keep the 2nd Second for myself."

The Hussar laughed, "I very much doubt he will agree to that!"

"Perhaps we shouldn't ask him then?" Anne suggested.

The Hussar continued to chuckle, "You're serious? What am I saying, of course you're serious! Do you even understand what the 2nd Second *is*?"

"I know Father Christèmas wants it very badly," said Anne.

"It's worthless," snorted the Hussar. "These sort of trinkets are all over the place. Spare nuts and bolts, left over from when the Homeworld renovated history. Do you really think the Great Houses would just leave some all-powerful device in the custody of the Chance Coteries?"

"Perhaps they have no choice," said Anne, leaning across him to retrieve her dagger from the bedstead. "Anyway, I don't care what it does or doesn't do. It would amuse me to take it from anyone who wishes to keep it. Is that not reason enough?"

The Hussar stroked her face, "'Reason' has very little to do with this ridiculous enterprise. But, very well. Should the opportunity arise, we shall take the trinket. Although, as we are going to all the trouble of breaking into a restricted area of spacetime, do you mind if I purloin some items of a more palpable value?"

"What have you got in mind?" Bonny asked, standing up and

sliding the dagger into her belt.

"Some rare and expensive minerals that the Kraken would delight in devouring," he replied.

"Why not?" she agreed. "If the Kraken requires sustenance, she shall have her fill. Have you noticed a change in the Kraken since we have embarked on this venture? Does she seem more... *frisky* to you?"

"The Kraken has some very complex manoeuvres to make," the Hussar explained. "It's been a while since she's had to chart a course as challenging as the one proposed by Father Christèmas. She's been calculating and plotting. The Kraken has been invigorated by all the possibilities."

"As have I," Anne grinned. "*You* are the only one of our merry trio who has not, it seems."

'"I am in possession of all the facts, my dear," the Hussar explained. "Provoke the Great Houses, Faction Paradox and the Chance Coteries in one fell swoop and see how quickly those possibilities dry up!"

He clicked his fingers.

Anne eyed her elemental.

His beautiful face was a mask for unearthly concerns, his eyes carrying secrets she could never understand. But Bonny understood the most important thing of all. She knew that he needed her. She had given up wondering why a creature such as he would require her mortal companionship, although she had formed several contrasting theories over time. To know why was of little importance, compared to knowing what she did.

When the Hussar first rescued her from her Jamaican cell, she had been in awe of him. A demonic angel had saved her and proposed a cosmic career, piracy with plunder beyond the nightmares of avarice. Now, the divine and the mundane were indistinguishable.

The Hussar was less a force of nature to her, especially now his familial obedience had been revealed. If she was indispensable to him, then he would do whatever she wanted. He would do as he was told, because that was what he did.

If she had learned anything at all in her life, it was that she possessed the luck of the devil himself and luck was made to be pushed.

“I provoke what I must,” said Anne.

“And I am yours to command,” said the Hussar, “So, I defy the facts for your pleasure alone.”

Anne threw on her overcoat - an ankle length, high collared, nautical affair in blue-grey. She hefted her bag over her shoulder and placed her wide-brimmed hat on her head. The Hussar stood up to see her off. She walked over to the door. “The flight to Haumea leaves in an hour,” she said, “I need move quickly. I am meeting Chantelle there.”

The Hussar nodded, “Do I not deserve a kiss?”

“Come here,” she ordered.

He walked over to her and they kissed, long and deep.

Then, with no further words, she slipped through the door and was gone.

The Hussar stood in silence and closed his eyes.

Chapter Thirty Four: He Knows When You're Awake

"Now their intent, is about to present

with all the appurtenances

A right Christmas, as of old it was,

to be gathered out of the Dances."

- *Christmas, His Masque (B.Jonson, 1616)*

Sojourner rolled over.

Despite the amount of champagne she had drunk over the course of the day, she could not get to sleep. Her face ached from hours of forced smiles and small talk. Mick had been short with her all day and Mason been purely business for the duration. She felt like a complete fraud.

Her eyes flicked opened, subconsciously aware of a presence in the room.

Sitting bolt upright, she discovered Father Christèmas perched on the foot of her bed.

"What are you doing here?" she snapped.

"Creeping around people's bedrooms in the middle of the night," he replied. "It's one of my most endearing habits. I thought everyone knew that. I hoped I might find you up. Coffee?"

She shrugged a may-as-well. He stood and disappeared into the next room.

Chris clicked on the light and busied himself with the rinsing of mugs. The Lady President padded through in her hotel robe and slippers and slumped into an armchair.

"Why would someone like you name yourself after a jolly, old fat man who gives presents to children?" Sojourner asked, grumpily.

"I didn't," said Chris, "It was the other way around. They named *him* **after me."**

“What?”

“I came first,” Chris explained. “It was that little prick Benny Jonson, having a dig at my expense. A deal went sour. Long story. The 'kindly fat cunt' thing started with him. Before you know it, the meme went viral. You know how these things happen. Occupational hazard. The Ministry were not amused, as you can imagine. Do you want milk and sugar?”

Sojourner felt a part of her inner child wither and die. She quietly cursed her own curiosity and asked for milk and two.

“Just thought I'd give you an update,” said Chris. “Chaz and Anne are about to leave for Haumea. Chaz is going to put Anne through her paces, get her into shape, just until you get there. The Hussar and I are also leaving shortly. We're going to skip forward a bit, until just before show time. Chaz will contact you when it’s time to leave. She's got a line of credit, so get yourself a nice new frock, on me.”

He brought her coffee and sat on the sofa opposite.

“What's the exit strategy?” she asked.

“I told you already, you just leave when the party's over,” said Chris, blowing his drink to cool it.

“You're not expecting trouble,” said Sojourner.

“Nope. Not from your end, anyway,” he replied.

“That's why you've saddled us with the psycho pirate queen,” said the president doubtfully.

“Anne is with you for good reason,” he said, “None of the War Powers are welcome at the Keep. But, displaced *humans* have a certain cachet in the Chance Coteries, especially famous ones like Ms Bonny. They're trophies. You'll look like you're playing the game if you turn up with her as your hired help. She'll be barred from any games of chance, of course. But that's not a problem. I can't imagine you will be indulging much anyway.”

“You imagine right,” said Sojourner.

“Anne's presence could also explain any abnormal temporal ticks

you or Chaz might inadvertently give off," Chris added. "I mean, you shouldn't set off any alarms or anything. Our detox processes are pretty thorough. But it's a useful side-effect, just in case."

"Why are we doing this?" asked Sojourner.

Chris furrowed his brow, "Like I said, I'm keeping you in the loop."

"No, I mean the whole thing," she said. "Why risk the wrath of the Ministry, Parliament, the Chance Coteries, probably even the Great Houses too. What exactly *is* the 2nd Second?"

"I thought I told you," said Chris. "It's a tiny piece of prehistory."

"And why do you want it so badly?" she continued.

"I don't," he replied. "It's more that they don't want me to have it *really* badly and I have to adjust my plans accordingly,"

The Lady President snorted, "Sorry, I'm not buying that. You're just being contrary for the hell of it? Please. You know what? Forget it. If you can't be straight with me, there's no point in even talking. I'm going back to bed. Let yourself out."

She stood up to leave. Chris held out his is hands in supplication, urging her to be seated. "Come on, Sojo," he said. "Please, relax."

"Stop bullshitting me!" she snapped, punctuating each word by stabbing the air with her index finger.

"Fine," murmured Chris. "Have a seat. Let me explain."

She sat.

"I am... *reasonably* confident," said Christèmas. "That with the 2nd Second, in conjunction with a few odds and ends from the Bankside collection, I could... *unpick* the Thread. Remove the limitations that the Great Houses placed on us all when they restructured history, right at the start."

"Oh, come on!" she scoffed. "That's absurd! They wouldn't leave a thing like that just lying around! You're losing your grip, Father."

"You think so?" Chris asked. His eyes glittered dangerously. "Well, what *you* think is neither here nor there, is it? You asked me. I told

you. Believe me. Don't. All you have to do is deliver the package."

"And then?"

"Come home."

"And *after* that?"

Christèmas paused. He looked at Sojourner for a long time. She held his gaze, almost casually.

"I owe you an apology," said Chris.

The president laughed.

"*I* should have come to recruit you," he admitted. "Chaz is a great girl, resourceful, reliable. But diplomacy is not really her strong point. She can be a little heavy handed at times. When she approached you, there were more threats than were entirely necessary, and for that, I apologise."

"Thanks," said Sojourner, sarcastically. "Does that mean I can go home now?"

Chris offered a tight smile. "Love to let you," he said, brightly. "But, can't, I'm afraid."

"So what difference does an apology make?"

"If I had been able to speak to you first," said Chris, "I think I could have convinced you to join us. No unpleasantness. No coercion. I could have made you understand. I am a great admirer of yours. How you shook off the Faction. What you've done with PROTEC. You'd have been a great ally."

"No offence," said Sojourner, "but, it would have made no difference. OK, you've got the charm and the chat, but you're still just another thug. No different from Chantelle. I know your type of old."

"I am... what's required, when required," Chris admitted. "As were you, when you first sold your soul to the Faction. It was a means to an end. Same as now."

"And what *is* 'the end'?"

“For you? You go home and carry on as if nothing has happened.”

Sojourner was sceptical. “What about you?” she asked. “When you get your '2nd Second', are you going to use it to 'unpick the thread'?”

Chris shook his head, “Nah, I'm going to use it for something else.”

“What's that?” asked the president.

“Leverage,” said Father Christèmas.

Chapter Thirty Five: Suspect Still At Large

"Northumbria Police have issued a photograph of a woman they wish to question in connection with the recent gun murders at Blackhall Rocks, County Durham. Four bodies were discovered in caves on to the beach, in the early hours of Monday morning. All were pronounced dead at the scene, each from multiple gunshot wounds.

The missing woman and the four deceased were known to the police as members of a notorious local drug gang, who had been active in the North East for several years. It is suspected that the murders may have been the result of a turf war, sparked by an attempt by the gang to expand their empire.

Sharonda Arkley, 24, of Ashington, Northumberland is considered extremely dangerous and should not be approached. Anyone with any information should contact their local police."

- *North Eastern Daily Press, (22nd March, 2005)*

Chantelle paced slowly around the circumference of the ship. She examined its surface closely, checking that every scuff and pockmark corresponded with those listed on the datapad.

She was accompanied by a giant bronze millipede.

The millipede was around twelve foot long and the width of an average human torso. Its tiny legs clicked against the concrete like a thousand stiletto heels as it snaked its way patiently behind Chantelle.

Chaz was nothing if not thorough. This was especially true when there was the risk of someone ripping her off. "What's that?" she demanded with disgust, pointing to a black speck on the edge of a vent, not included on her list.

The millipede burst into action, shooting up the side of the ship to examine the vent. It picked at the speck with its mandibles. It came away easily, leaving no trace.

"Unidentified detritus," clicked the millipede.

Chantelle scowled suspiciously and continued with her examination.

Eventually, she was satisfied. She completed her inspection and handed the data pad back to the millipede, who swallowed it and scuttled back to its office, over the far side of the space port.

She checked her watch, collected her cases from the tarmac and boarded the ship.

It was a golden pleasure yacht, saucer-shaped with scalloped butterfly wings, named *The Frugal Reward.* **Clearly a remnant from the days of the Company, the vessel was ostentatious to look at, but had hidden defensive and offensive capabilities. When a ship such as** *the Reward* **openly flaunted its riches to potential pirates, it only made sense that it could also outgun anyone wishing to try their luck.**

The hold was just big enough to house L-Event. The rooms and corridors inside were creamy and golden. Every surface seemed to be coated with mother-of-pearl. It was all ergonomic curves and ovals and there were no visible joins in any of the panelling.

Chantelle nodded approvingly when she reached the cockpit. The pilot's seat was more of a chaise longue than a chair and was sunk into an indentation on the floor. Chaz dumped her bags, threw off her coat and hopped into the seat. She lay back, making herself comfortable and lit a cigarette.

Taking a deep drag, she surveyed the view of Enyo's bustling spaceport, through the huge viewscreen. There were leviathans and crane-people filling massive cargo vessels with freight. Autofolk were ferrying passengers to and from the charter craft. Ships from all across the PROTEC worlds and beyond arrived and departed in a relentless whirlwind of shifting metal.

Chaz touched the control panel and did a sweep. Locating the tiny piece of technology she required, Chaz adjusted the ship's communications array to a corresponding frequency and sent a message.

"Haway, Anne Bonny, man! Git yor arse owor heor!"

On the farside of the space port, Anne almost leapt out of her skin as Chaz's dulcet tones blurted from her earring communicator.

Anne, yelped, nearly dropping her holdall.

“I'll send yee a homing signal,” chuckled Chaz. “Just folla the beep, hen.”

Anne gritted her teeth and glanced around. She attempted to appear casual, surrounded by travellers and workers, driven with purpose and urgent sense of destination. She mimicked their attitudes as she tilted her head, desperately searching for the sound that would guide her to Chantelle. She found the tone and headed off into the crowds with new found confidence.

Bonny hadn't forgotten Chaz had bested her in a fight. This fact made her extremely irritable. Normally when people irritated her, she simply killed them. This was clearly not an option in Chantelle's case.

Not yet, at least.

Eventually, she found herself standing alone on a vast, empty landing pad. The homing beep had stopped. She tapped her foot impatiently.

“Can you hear me?” asked Bonny.

“Aye,” Chaz replied.

“Where are you?”

“Tryin’ oot this thing's flutter-drive,” said Chantelle. “It's mint. Dead quiet. Watch y’heed, hen.”

With an ear-splitting clang, an ornate, gilded, spiral staircase dropped from the sky, cracking the concrete at Anne's feet and causing her to leap in surprise. She tripped, falling backwards onto the runway, her elbow connecting sharply with the tarmac and her hat flying off her head.

Looking up, *The Frugal Reward* **hung silently, thirty feet in the air, a winged halo of gold and light. The staircase curled out from the ship's hub, connecting the ground with its blinding white interior.**

“Soz,” said Chaz. “Divvnt mean t'drop it like that.”

“You could have killed me!” screamed Anne.

“Alreet! Fucksake, man!”

Anne leapt to her feet, snatched up her hat, hoisted her bag onto her shoulder and ascended the stairs, two at a time. Once inside, the ship wound in the staircase, sealed itself and shot towards the upper atmosphere.

By the time Anne stomped onto the bridge, the yacht was already in open space and preparing itself for the jump to Haumea. The pirate queen found herself momentarily distracted by the dramatic image on the ship's viewscreen. Eris, in hemisphere, rotated along the frame of the window, receding into the dark as it did so. The local sun passed overhead as *The Frugal Reward* plotted vectors, banked away from the planet's gravitational influence and shifted power to its warp engine.

The vessel paused, coasting while it waited for the command.

"Let's 'av it," said Chaz, and the ship twisted space to its will.

The viewscreen exploded into violent steaks of colour, snapping Anne from her transfixion. Chantelle accompanied the cascade with whoops of expletive laced glee.

Despite herself, Anne Bonny found that she, too was exhilarated. Travel via the Kraken very rarely felt like travel at all. They simply spent a duration of time, inside the beast's belly, then found themselves elsewhere when it eventually opened its mouth.

This ship, whilst still beyond her comprehension, seemed to sail the black waters of space, catching the wind and riding the currents, whist she watched from the bridge as the vessel's captain, with Chantelle as her faithful helmsman.

"Make yersel at hyem, hen," said Chaz, over her shoulder. "Y'gan have captain's quarters, like. Ah winnet be a sec."

"Where is the captain's quarters?" asked Anne, slightly perturbed that Chantelle seemed to have read her thoughts.

"Back there," Chaz replied, waving her hand absently, "Y'cannit miss it."

Anne frowned, turned and left the bridge.

Chantelle lit another cigarette, opened the communications relay and broadcast an encrypted message on a very discreet wavelength.

The message said, “Package In Transit.”

Chapter Thirty Six: Valuable Lessons

"Herbert Schtucker's work with temporally displaced humans produced some fascinating observations. Schtucker noticed that all the humans he profiled shared a similar ambivalence towards the Great Houses. To a greater or lesser extent, all professed feelings of empowerment from their time active experiences. But, there was a sense that this empowerment came with a caveat.

Time travel certainly broadened minds, but only as far as the Great Houses decreed."

- *The Great Houses And Us (Prof. H. Lennistein, 31,441)*

The captain's quarters of *the Frugal Reward* **was impressive, even to Anne Bonny's cynical eye. The bed was a vast triangular hammock, littered with opulent gold cushions and rich fabrics. To the left was a huge dressing table, with a mirror filling an entire wall and to the right was a luxurious couch facing an entertainment screen.**

The ceiling was a transparent dome, revealing a kaleidoscope of rolling colours as the ship warped space around it, propelling itself across the preposterous distances between worlds. The scent of jasmine wafted from the aircon.

Anne dropped her bag and threw her coat and hat onto the bed. She wandered over to the drinks cabinet, next to the couch and sniffed the contents of one crystal decanter. Not immediately recognizing the spirit contained within, she shrugged and poured herself a glass anyway.

Strolling across the room, she plonked herself at the dressing table, casually checking her reflection while she sipped her drink. It was some kind of brandy, she decided, and not unpleasant. Anne took a larger swig, enjoying the spirit's invigorating warmth.

Chantelle entered. She was now barefoot and dressed only in her black vest and leggings. She wandered over to the cabinet and poured herself a drink.

"We've got a while before we get t'Haumea," said Chaz. "Chris said ahm t'bring y'up t'speed. Put y'through your paces, like."

“What do you mean?” said Anne.

“Yas fair rusty,” said Chaz. “Yas s'posed t'be a body guard. Y’couldn't guard owt.”

Incensed, Anne drained the last of her drink and hurled the glass tumbler straight at Chantelle.

A shadow flashed.

The tumbler exploded two feet from Anne's hand, showering her with tiny glass splinters. The pirate flinched, instinctively throwing up her arm to protect her face. The edge of her hand stung sharply as a flying shard left a short, red scratch.

Anne lowered her arm and saw the weapon revealed.

The shadow loomed above her, a black echo of Chantelle's silhouette, but gigantic and twisted. The temperature in the room seemed to drop a few degrees. Chaz was leaning casually on the couch on the other side of the room, still sipping her drink. A dark aura surrounded her. The shadow weapon projected itself out from this aura, almost filling the room. Its dark hand brandished a formidable black claw hammer, as ethereal as smoke and yet as unyielding as granite.

“How do you *do* that?” hissed Anne, livid with envy.

“Perks of the job,” said Chaz. “Look, y’need t’calm doon. Yar fair radge. They'll fook y’up, nee bother, unless y'chill tha fook oot, man. Y'nar warra mean, like?”

“Yes!” shrieked Anne. “I understand! I'm calm now!”

“Aye, y'sound proper fooking calm, like,” Chaz snorted.

Anne gritted her teeth and clenched her fists. She struggled to find some internal neutral space. Taking a deep breath, she slowly unknotted her tensions and uncoiled herself.

“I.... *apologise* for throwing the glass,” she muttered with as much sincerity as she could muster. “I am... *unaccustomed* to being... in this... position.”

“That's obvious,” said Chantelle. Her shadow flickered and dissolved into nothing. “Look, Ah can show yee some moves, aye? You got t'keep y’heed when we git to the Keep, like. Them Clavigers divvnt fook aboot, hen.”

“Clavigers?”

“Tha Keep's guards,” Chantelle explained. “Muckle armoured, tooled up and canny handy. Not like them useless pricks tha Hussar's been lining up for yee t'blow t'fook. Y’kick off at the Keep, ya fooked, hen.”

Anne nodded. She finally had a grasp on the truth of the situation.

She had jumped from her small pond, into the ocean and discovered that she was not the shark she had imagined. This was what she had chosen and was going to take far more adjustment on her part that she had ever imagined. Perhaps, that was the problem. Prior to this, she hadn't been able to truly *imagine* anything properly. Before her escape, she had no knowledge of the secret worlds, beyond the mundane. After meeting the Hussar, she had become intoxicated with her new understanding. She believed the potency such knowledge delivered to be absolute.

But, the Hussar had only revealed to her what he deigned necessary. Her experiences had been deliberately limited. He insisted it had been for her own benefit, but Bonny was beginning to wonder.

Chantelle drained her glass. “A've left me tabs in the cockpit,” she tutted. “Unpack y’sword an’ that, hen, an we'll have a dance win ah git back, like.”

She wandered off in search of her cigarettes.

Bonny examined the cut on her hand. It was only small, but a bead of blood was threatening to ruin the cuff of her shirt. She licked the wound and stored the memory of the affront for use at a later date.

Chapter Thirty Seven: Property Values

"XIII: Why do the desperate take no priority in the distinctions of Chance?

Response: Chance has no priorities but to itself and the desperate bring a bitter bouquet"

- *The Catechism of Chance (traditional)*

Teardrop swooped above Ownership Square, gently wafting her diaphanous, chromium wings. She scanned the shifting formations far below.

Teardrop's observation of the legions of Clavigers, marching precisely across the pale pink marble, was experienced simultaneously by Scacia De Rien. The Indeterminatrix herself was lying, face down on a treatment table, some distance away, in the steam and seclusion of a private spa.

Scacia was having the works. Her skin was being realigned, her chakras buffed, her pores flushed, her nails upgraded, her hair spliced, her aura tinted, her lashes matched, her eyes quantified, her teeth fused, her chin persuaded and her buttocks pulsed.

As the spa nurses busied themselves around her with their various administrations, Teardrop's overview of the Clavigers' rehearsals overlaid themselves on Scacia's consciousness. It felt to Scacia as though her body filled Ownership Square and the Clavigers marched around her, like tiny battalions of tame scorpions.

As highly trained hands worked the kinks out of her shoulders, Scacia tried her best not to be too irritated by the Clavigers' slightly screwy alignment. They were supposed to be forming an image of the De Rien family crest, the Bladed Tridecagon. Right now, they looked more like a squashed octopus.

She reminded herself that it was just a rehearsal and that the whole point of practicing was in order to get everything right on the night. Teardrop pinged a memo to the Magister Militum, offering thanks and encouragement to the Clavigers, while also advising them to tighten up their lines.

Teardrop drifted to the far side of the Square where staging was still being erected. Tech-giraffes hung great curtains, bolted scaffolding and stapled scenery, whilst Lasermen sketched out their proposed light pageants, along the marble walls. The flashes illuminated flickering clouds of aroma-swarms, which hung heavy in the air, honing their synchronized scent displays with intoxicating grace.

Ownership Square was at the lowest level, in the very footprint of Serendipity Keep itself. Five great pillars, many kilometres in diameter, supported the entire structure. A bottomless chasm surrounded the Square, serving as a moat. The chasm had docking bays, carved at ever lower intervals, into the rocky walls, where the hoi polloi parked their spacecraft, before offering devotion to the Keep.

The chasm also served those whom chance had neglected, hoping the ultimate act of devotion might present better fortune for any loved ones left behind. It rarely worked. Chance takes unkindly to the smell of desperation, a fact Scacia had learned from an early age.

It was the seventeenth question of the catechism, taught to her by Dotti, her doting fluke maid, when Scacia was barely old enough to write her own name. Now this tiny, intimate memory flashed through Teardrop's liquid mind, as her gilded wings awkwardly caught the updraft from the yawning moat. A gust flipped her and sent her spiralling, uncontrollably downwards.

Teardrop condensed into a ball, allowing herself to fall and regain her bearings. The tug of gravity righted her swiftly and for a moment she fell like a giant glittering raindrop, before folding herself into a golden swan and flapping back across the vast courtyard.

On her treatment table, Scacia opened her eyes, sensing her cymbiont's momentary wobble.

Teardrop pinged a pulse of embarrassed reassurance. Everything was fine.

Scacia ordered Teardrop back to her side. She had seen enough of the preparations. It was stressing her at a time when she needed to be focused on relaxation and Teardrop almost falling into a bottomless chasm was not helping with this one little bit.

Teardrop chuckled a swan-like chuckle and made for the nearest

access duct.

“You have a particularly stubborn knot of tension in your left shoulder, Indeterminatrix,” said the masseuse, her knuckles increasing the pressure, causing Scacia's shoulder blade to creak.

“It's done that ever since the last time I got it replaced,” grumbled Scacia. “You're doing a great job, though, honey. And, please call me 'Scacia''

“Of course... Scacia,” the masseuse agreed.

“You're new here,” Scacia realised. “How are they treating you, darlin'?”

“It's a great honour, Indeter... I mean... Scacia.”

“What's your name, honey?”

“Xhini.”

“What a beautiful name!” Scacia sighed. “Have you been with us long, Xhini?”

“All my life,” said Xhini, proudly.

“Aww, you were a child devotion?” gushed Scacia. “That's so sweet! I feel so proud of all you kids! It's like you're my very own!”

“Thank you, Scacia,” said Xhini. “I am your property.”

Scacia laughed, “Of course you are! But, That's not what I meant. I meant... Oh, you know what I mean, honey!”

The masseuse wasn't sure that she did, but nodded politely, just in case.

The knot in Scacia's shoulder was slowly rubbed away. The tension dispersed, and with it, the name of the masseuse who had worked so hard to remove it. By the time the manicurists took over, the Indeterminatrix had forgotten she had even spoken to Xhini and never once looked upon her face.

Chapter Thirty Eight: Uneasy Alliance

"The Elective Semantectomy is a procedure by which a Houseworlder has their 'true' name removed from history (by way of esoteric temporal engineering techniques) and replaced with an impersonal title or appellation.

The motivations for an individual to undergo such a procedure vary, but in the majority of cases, it is in order to protect a bloodline from perceived shame or ignominy. It has also been said that Houseworlders of a certain generation, when finding themselves stationed amongst the 'Lesser Species', often underwent the procedure rather than adopt a local name, fearing something they termed 'conceptual contamination.'

It is unclear whether this concern was warranted or was just another manifestation of Houseworld snobbery."

- *The Great Houses And Us (Prof. H. Lennistein, 31,441)*

Father Christèmas carefully unplugged all the wires and slid the games console into his plastic carrier bag. He was trying to be as quiet as possible, but he needn't have bothered. The snoring bodies that littered the stinking basement flat through which he had tiptoed were not going to awaken anytime soon.

Empty beer cans were strewn across the floor and the overflowing ashtrays spilled cigarette stubs and dope debris onto the devastated carpet. Chris stuffed the two joypads into his bag and made for the exit.

In the hall he winced as he met a young woman, dressed only in an over-sized T-shirt, heading towards him. Her head was stooped, her eyes bleary and her mousey, matted hair was awry.

"Morning," she mumbled, elbowing past him. The woman shuffled into the bathroom and locked the door.

"Morning," whispered Chris and left.

In total contrast to the dank pit from which he had just emerged, the day outside was crisp and clean. Chris pulled a red woolly hat from his pocket and slid it onto his head. His ears and his scalp always got

the worst of any chill in the air. Despite this, he still found a spring in his step.

It was Sunday, so traffic was scarce and the streets quiet. He swung his carrier bag cheerily as he strolled and began to whistle *The Dance of the Cuckoos,* **winding his way down the hill towards the river.**

The docks were devoid of life, save for the echoing quack of a distant duck. A thin layer of morning mist hung a few inches above the motionless water. Chris did a quick double-take to make sure he was entirely alone. Satisfied no one was spying on him, he walked down the slippery steps to the water's edge and waited.

The Kraken broke the surface of the water and opened its mouth wide.

Father Christèmas stepped onto the monster's tongue. The Kraken gulped and Chris disappeared down into its gaping gullet. It closed its mouth and slid back below the icy waters of the dock.

Deep within the belly of the beast, in an otherwise sparse cavity, the Hussar crouched behind an old, cathode ray, widescreen television. He was wiring the TV into the Kraken's visual cortex ports, with the aid of a sonic speculum. On the floor was etched a chalk circle of around ten feet in diameter. The circle surrounded a five pointed star.

The TV had been placed on a table at the upper point of the pentacle. On the lower two points, rested two battered and mismatched armchairs. On the eastern point of the star sat a buzzing refrigerator, full of cans of beer. To the west was a table, stacked with bags of nuts, crisps, biscuits and chocolate.

Christèmas had arrived.

"There we are," he announced, proudly. "One games console, charged from the celebration of a somewhat debauched twenty first birthday party!"

"A birthday party!?" snorted the Hussar. "Was it really worth going to all this trouble?"

"The *location* **of the party was key," Chris explained. "The flat where it was held was constructed on the site of the immolation and**

burial of an innocent gypsy girl, for witchcraft, four centuries ago."

He peeled off the plastic bag with a flourish and held the battered box of wires with the reverence of a priceless, holy relic. "I think it makes all the difference if you make that little extra effort, don't you?" beamed Chris.

"I have never really found the need for such rituals," the Hussar admitted.

"I am not a slave to Faction methods," Chris admitted. "But, I do like things that *work*. Come on, you must admit, recycling a death of a poor unfortunate by superstitious morons has a certain charm to it, no?"

"Perhaps your involving her in this rite, posthumously, is what the 'superstitious morons' detected in the first place?" the Hussar suggested.

Chris hadn't considered this possibility. "That's a point, actually," he conceded. "You know, you'd make a great Faction acolyte with an observation like that, Hussar."

"I'm not sure that's a compliment," the Hussar remarked.

Chris stepped into the circle and began to plug the console into the TV. "You never considered taking the Grandfather's shilling?" he asked.

"What?" said the Hussar, peering from behind the set.

"The Faction," said Chris. "You never thought of joining?"

The Hussar laughed, "I have no need of such affiliations. The Homeworld stifled me enough. I needed to sample the *simple* pleasures of the lesser species."

Chris bristled at the use of the term, but said nothing.

Oblivious, the Hussar continued. "The flesh pleasures. Life and death. Passion and woe. The creativity of finite creatures. It is more... *invigorating* to me than anything the Faction or the Great Houses could ever offer."

“Why the title?” asked Chris.

“What do you mean?” asked the Hussar.

“I thought the semantectomy was used to protect House bloodlines from shame,” said Christèmas. “Cutting your name from history and replacing it with a title. That's why you do it, isn't it?”

“That is... *usually* **true,” the Hussar replied, in a slightly defensive tone. “In my case it was for the opposite reason. It was separate** *me* **from** *them***. To 'cut the cord'. I need no name, no bloodline to protect me.”**

“So, your folks were completely OK with you shagging a giant space octopus then?” wondered Chris.

“I have no 'folks',” sneered the Hussar. “How I... interface with the Kraken is only of concern to those who can comprehend such a bond. I am afraid that rules you out, Father.”

“What about Anne?” asked Christèmas. “She's only 'lesser species' too, surely?”

The Hussar hoisted a cold smile to his taciturn lips. Christèmas hadn't expected a reply and didn't receive one.

Chris finished plugging in the console. “I'm all done here,” he said. “How are you getting on?”

“Almost finished,” said the Hussar.

Christèmas went to the fridge, retrieved two cans of lager. He placed one next to Hussar, popped the other and took a swig. They just needed the nod from Chantelle and he could move forward with the next phase.

All depending on when the Hussar decided to make his move, of course.

There was a move coming, Chris knew this for certain. He had no idea what form it would take or when it would occur. In the scheme of things, it didn't really matter.

But, Father Christèmas was a curious fellow.

Chapter Thirty Nine: Leaving Haumea

"It is with a heavy heart that I have tendered my resignation as personal assistant to the Lady President of PROTEC. I have not reached this decision lightly. Recent decisions made by the Lady President have rendered my position untenable. I feel that the presidency itself is threatened by a particular course of action the president is undertaking.

My advice on this matter has been disregarded entirely. I cannot, in good grace, continue to support the Lady President at this time. As such, I am unable to execute my duties to the fullest of my abilities for these reasons.

I find it hard to come to terms with the fact that I have lost faith in Sojourner Hooper-Agogô. This is something I thought I would never do. Much as I regret that it has come to this, I look forward to new challenges to serve the PROTEC citizens, in whatever capacity that may be."

- *Press Release from Mason Peak*

Maybe it was because she had accepted Mason's resignation so quickly.

It was understandable that he would have been hurt. In hindsight, she could have handled it an awful lot better than she had. Even so, leaking her departure from Haumea to the press was incredibly out of character. Telling them where she was headed was borderline unforgivable.

It was almost as if she had betrayed him in some way and he was getting his own back.

Sojourner sighed, shaded her face with her hand and sank deeper into the driver's seat.

L-Event had tinted all the windows, so the mass of flashing camera-bots that swarmed outside could not see the Lady President, no matter how hard they tried. Haumea's Techno-Militia did their best to disperse the press that barred the mammoth from entering Laka City Spaceport and delaying their rendezvous with Chantelle and Anne.

All communications frequencies were flooded with questions. Was it

true that the Lady President was visiting Serendipity Keep? Did this not compromise her position as the PROTEC head of state? Why had Mason Peak resigned?

L-Event issued non-committal responses, promising a full press briefing shortly. This announcement was having little effect on the crowd outside. Ellie suggested that Sojourner offered an interview, which could possibly placate the demanding hordes. Sojourner dismissed the idea. They had run through all the feasible scenarios and it would only make matters worse. Whichever side of the story she supplied, she was not going to come out of this well.

They needed to get out of here, get the job done and deal with the repercussions if they ever came back alive.

A new message carved its way through the bombardment of questions. From the surly way the message ingratiated itself into the communications feed, it was obviously from Chantelle. She was coming to get them and they were to look out for her.

This fact did little to reassure Sojourner.

L-Event reported that a ship was approaching from directly above, dropping vertically at tremendous speed. Ellie was pretty robust, but the prospective collision would probably do more than just dink the paintwork. Camera-bots and other press vehicles had also clearly detected the approach and had started to back away nervously, then run squealing for cover.

The Frugal Reward **arrived, stopping dead, fifty feet above L-Event's howdah.**

"Alreet!?" barked Chantelle, over the comms. "Canny inertia dampeners on this thing, man! Hang aboot. We'll winch yez up, like."

The back end of the fluttering craft split open and mechanical arms unfolded from within, forming a pneumatic scoop. The arms cradled L-Event around her middle and strained to lift the mammoth from the ground.

The ship wavered, then steadied itself as more power was delivered to its eerily quiet engines. Seemingly finding its second wind, the golden craft hoisted the elephantine machine inside itself, sealed the

doors and shot, vertically into the sky at incredible velocity.

Sojourner readied herself.

She was dressed in her traditional work wear, tough green canvas trousers and matching jacket, both covered in pockets and pouches, with yellow day-glo patches, edged with white, reflective piping. Steel-toed engineer boots covered her feet, her hair was braided into thin rows, with chunky protective goggles pushed up onto her head.

She checked her contingency stash, hidden beneath a control panel in the kitchen. It contained a small attaché case and a souldrive, programmed to back-up Ellie on a moment by moment basis, should they need to leave in a hurry. The drive was housed in a large back pack, which also contained an interstellar phone and two blaster pistols.

She took out the phone and called home. To her relief, it went straight to Rex's voicemail.

"Hi, babe," she said, nervously. "Look, don't panic. Whatever you hear on the news or whatever, there's more to this that I can't go into right now. Trust me. I know what I am doing and you don't need to worry. I wish I could hear your voice. Kiss the girls for me. I'll see you soon. I love you!"

Switching off the call, she fought the urge to cry out for her family and placed the phone back in the backpack.

Sojourner considered for a moment, then took one of the guns, checked it was loaded and slotted it into the inside pocket of her jacket. She sealed the panel and left the relative safety of the howdah.

It was a tight fit inside the hangar. L-Event's howdah touched the ceiling and there was no room for the mammoth to turn. A mezzanine, level with Ellie's back, surrounded her on three sides. Sojourner hopped over the balustrade and went in search of the crew.

Chantelle was on the command deck, preparing the ship for the jump to Serendipity Keep. She nodded to Sojourner as she entered. There was no sign of Bonny.

"Thanks," said the president.

“What for?” said Chaz.

“Getting us out of there.”

Chantelle weighed Sojourner's words, unsure of their level of sincerity. She stared and shrugged.

“Nee bother,” she said, eventually. “Bonny's got the posh quarters, like. Y’gonna have to take one of the others.”

“It's alright,” said Sojourner. “I'll stay with Ellie. How's she doing anyway?”

“Bonny? Aye, canny. Ah knocked her doon a few times, like,” Chaz admitted, with a grin. “Built her back up, mind. She'll be nee bother. Taught her some new chops. If she keeps her tempah, she'll be reet. Divvnt wind her up, man.”

The president shook her head. Getting an overreaction from Anne had been had been all too easy and not to say a little amusing. But, she needed this to run exactly as smoothly Chantelle and Christèmas had planned. For the duration of the job, she would be doing nothing to intentionally antagonise the other members of her party.

“I'm here to get the job done and go home,” Sojourner stated. “I'll bite my tongue as long as you keep her in check. Fair?”

“Aye,” Chantelle agreed.

“Where is she anyway?” asked Sojourner. “I think I should go and clear the air before we start.”

Chaz narrowed her eyes. She retrieved a cigarette from the packet on the panel next to her, lit it with a cautionary flame and took a drag. Holding the Lady President's gaze for two long seconds, she let the nicotine flood her bloodstream.

“She's inna quarters,” Chaz warned, exhaling the words through a cloud of sagacious smoke.

The stateswoman offered Chantelle her most inclusive and assertive smile, then turned and left the command deck.

The captain's quarters were, by now, a total wreck. There was

broken glass and splintered furniture littering the carpet. There were bullet holes and the stab marks of throwing knives decorating all the walls. The bed linen was shredded and the entertainment screen hanging off the wall. The room stank of smoke and sweat.

Anne Bonny was sparring with a shadow.

The pirate had her flame hair tired back in a tight French plait, with a red paisley bandana covering her forehead. There were abrasions on her face and a plaster on her left eyebrow. She was dressed in a grubby white vest, decorated with fading blood stains and had a sheen of sweat coating her entire frame.

She still wore her piratical leggings and boots, but the rest of her was a transformation from the immaculate cypher Sojourner had met on Eris.

There were other cuts and abrasions on Anne's elbows and arms and both her hands were wrapped in blood flecked bandages. Her musculature seemed tighter and more sinewy than before and her eyes, whilst still burning with emerald rage, had a control to them that was entirely new.

Sojourner stood silently in the door way and watched the proceedings.

The shadow was an echo of Bonny. It crossed its black blade against the corporeal original with a level but ferocious zeal. Evenly matched, the duelists attempted to out manoeuvre each other, ducking, parrying and feinting to tease an opening through their opponent's defences.

The shadow spun, slashing its blade in a wide arc. Anne dropped, sweeping the shadow's feet from underneath it. It tumbled awkwardly to the carpet. Not missing a beat, Bonny hopped forward and plunged her sword through her opponent's back, pinning it to the floor.

The shadow shuddered once, then shattered like ice.

Anne gave a satisfied sigh, then became aware of Sojourner's presence. She looked the Lady President up and down, assessing her for the appropriate response. Quietly panting, Anne Bonny bowed slightly and greeted Sojourner with a suitably reverent tone.

“Lady President,” said the pirate.

“Impressive,” said the president. “It takes me back to my days training against sparring shadows.”

“Thank you,” said Anne, doubtfully. “Chantelle has told me a little of the Faction’s rituals.”

“Oh god, so *many* rituals, you would not believe!” said Sojourner, rolling her eyes at the memory. “I got off quite lightly really. My sponsor, Godfather Starch, didn’t have much patience for all the ceremony. He only splashed the blood about when he really had to. I can’t remember him ever lighting a candle.”

“Chantelle has mentioned the blood,” said Bonny. “To feed the spirits. What did she call them?”

“You mean the loa,” said Sojourner. “The loa don’t really *drink* blood. It’s more symbolic than that. Starch used to say that the loa weren’t so much *spirits* as a way of looking at time from a particular angle.”

The president looked at Bonnie and saw that she had lost her.

There was an awkward silence.

Sojourner scratched her head. “Look, Anne,” she said, and then wondered, “Do I call you “Anne” or do you prefer 'Bonny'?”

“Either,” the pirate replied.

“We got off on the wrong foot,” the president continued. “I took out my grievances with Christèmas on you. That wasn't fair. I'd like to apologise for the way I behaved and hope we can put it behind us. We've got the same objective. We need to work together. Don't you agree?”

“Indeed, Lady President,” Anne replied, sliding her sword back into its sheath.

“You can call me 'Sojourner',” said Sojourner.

“I am your bondswoman,” said Anne. “You are my lady, Lady President. I should show due respect. Should I not?”

“Oh, you're getting into character,” said Sojourner. “I get it. That's fine. So, no hard feelings?”

Bonny nodded and held out her hand.

Sojourner took it and shook it decisively.

It seemed that Chantelle really had knocked some sense into Bonny. Perhaps, now that she had been distanced from her Great House boyfriend, Anne was behaving more like her old self. Her true, human self.

Or, maybe Anne Bonny was playing her for a fool.

The pirate and the president shared their moment of contrition, both harbouring doubts as to the moment’s authenticity. Neither displayed these doubts to the other and neither cared either way.

Chapter Forty: Breaking The Ice

“As the War is a war throughout all history, then the War never 'ends'.

As such, all smaller scale conflicts are, in a sense, merely an extension of this 'True' War. On one level, local conflicts can be seen as echoes of the hostilities, latent throughout the structure of history itself. But, there is also some hard evidence of smaller scale conflicts, and in some cases, even individual combatants, being co-opted by the various War Powers for their own ends.

It has been said, 'To pick up a pointed stick is to pick a side'. Although, to time-inactive combatants, the side in question can often be very hard to discern and may be prone to change from one moment to the next.”

- *The Great Houses And Us (Prof. H. Lennistein, 31,441)*

Steam rose from the ravine. The hot clouds cooled rapidly on contact with the subzero void of space, transforming the vapour into icy crystals that scattered across the surface of the comet.

The *Inanem Magnanime Milites* **were stirring.**

The warship thrummed, its ancient engines igniting, shaking off the remainder of melting ice as the power steadily increased. The ship slid slowly and steadily along the ravine, the rock walls cracking and widening to allow passage.

The engines reached a silent crescendo as the warship erupted through the outer crust. Shards of rock and ice spewed from the aperture as the ship emerged, like some terrible black metal larvae.

The ship paused, a few feet above the comet's surface, as if to find its bearings. Eventually, it rose slowly into space. It came to a halt, a few hundred kilometres later, as the comet tumbled beneath, tearing away into the darkness, abandoning its monstrous offspring to the void.

Notionally nearby, the Kraken hung at an abstruse angle, oblique to the continuum and consequently invisible. It wafted its tendrils like a veiled puppeteer, the warship stringed like some immense marionette.

Within the Kraken, Father Christèmas and the Hussar sat, slouched

in armchairs, each holding a gamepad in their hands. They watched the television screen in front of them, thumbs twitching, getting the feel for the warship's controls.

It had been decided that Chris would control the ship's flight, while the Hussar handled the craft's weapons systems. The television screen was split vertically, with the pilot's views and flight gauges on one side and the gunner's targeting, ammunition and power levels on the other.

"How did you come across these marauders in the first place," asked the Hussar, adjusting the ship's plasma cannon to a more agreeable wattage.

"Oh, these sleeper-hives are all over the place," said Chris. "They were forever freezing battalions of themselves for a rainy day. Not exactly subtle, but they're a handy blunt instrument for when you need one. Reasonably easy to hack. Instant rent-a-mob. Your one-stop, violent-distraction solution. Everyone hates 'the cymbies', don't they? They'd blame them for everything if they could."

Christèmas dropped his gamepad in his lap and cracked open another can of beer.

"We'll have a few test runs," he said, between sips. "I mean, we don't have to be perfect, but we don't want the marauders getting obliterated too early either."

"The ship's targeting is all automated anyway," said the Hussar, opening his own beer. "Everything seems to be working perfectly. That plasma-cannon would seem to be the best tool for the job."

Chris nodded, "Straight in. Bosh! Maximum disruption. The defines barrier wobbles. The Kraken does its thing. We keep the marauders going as long as possible. Scramble their security, keep all eyes on the cymbies. Could even send some of the troops out to try and board their interceptors. Might be a laugh?"

"The Kraken should only take a few moments to lock on to the destination," said the Hussar, opening his own can of beer. "We just need the destination to be where and when it is supposed to be."

"Chaz has it all in hand," said Chris. "We don't need to hang about once she's in."

“How do we know when De Rein will read the poetry?” asked the Hussar.

“Chaz will request a recital at the opening ceremony as soon as they arrive,” said Chris. “They may or may not grant it. It doesn't matter. Either way, the AI will upload the folio to make an assessment. As soon as it does that, we're in.”

The Hussar nodded, “The Kraken will do the rest.”

They both took a satisfied gulp of beer.

“Have you given any more thought to your fee?” asked Chris.

The Hussar moistened his lips, “Our involvement is to indulge Anne's desire. There is little else that interests me.”

“You know you're welcome to anything else in the vault,” said Chris. “There'll be some nice pieces. Something to take as a gift for the missus, maybe?”

The Hussar nodded gratefully and raised his beer can in a toast.

Chris did the same.

“To receiving what we deserve,” the Hussar proposed.

Father Christèmas smirked at the Houseworlder's provocative choice of words.

“What we deserve,” Chris replied.

The Hussar drank deep.

Chris finished his beer in one gargantuan swig, crushed the can and tossed it over his shoulder.

Chapter Forty One: When Chaz Met the Faction

"Recruitment into Faction Paradox happens in a number of ways. It usually requires the prospective acolyte to complete some form of rite or initiation. Initiations can come in many guises, ranging from the arcane to the outright bizarre.

In some isolated cases, it is rare, but not unknown, for recruits to bypass much of the traditional vetting, ritual and ceremony and be taken into the fold on the request of a powerful sponsor on whatever grounds they see fit."

- *Faction Paradox: A Negotiable History (S. Walmric, AF 189)*

Within L-Event's howdah, Sojourner, Anne and Chantelle made their final preparations. Sojourner had not felt at all comfortable about inviting the others into her sanctum, but she kept her reservations to herself.

The three sat around the table, cleaning weapons, testing each other, checking their stories were straight and that they were all singing from the same hymn sheet. Chantelle stubbed out yet another cigarette end into a dirty coffee mug, which was now half full of ash. L-Event had boosted the howdah's air filters to cope, but the rank tobacco smell still lingered.

The poetry folio was in the centre of the table. This was the first time Chantelle had revealed the book to the others. It was a handsome volume, leather bound with weathered gold inlay. At first, Sojourner had admired the convincing workmanship, but then she remembered that this was no forgery. The folio was entirely authentic. The alterations to the work inside had been made retroactively.

It didn't look fake because there was nothing fake about it.

Anne was sharpening her favourite dagger on a whetstone. She listened attentively to Chantelle's breakdown of the upcoming events and answered all her test questions quickly and accurately, every time they were levelled at her.

Sojourner checked the itinerary on her datapad for the fifth time in thirty seconds.

They really were ready to go.

L-Event informed her that they were twelve hours away from the Keep.

“We've got twelve hours,” said Sojourner.

“The elephant told you this,” said Bonny. It was a statement, but with the subtle, exploratory tone of a question.

“It's not like she tells me, as such,” Sojourner explained. “I am just... aware of it. Like I am aware of the room temperature fluctuating between twenty and twenty one degrees right now.”

“Doesn't all this extra information distract you at all?” asked Anne.

“No more than, say, objects in the periphery of your vision are 'distracting',” said Sojourner. “You can choose to focus on them. But otherwise, they're just there.”

“When you were bonded to the machine,” said Anne. “Did it hurt?”

Sojourner shook her head. It was hard conjuring the sensations of the time before Ellie. She knew, in a rational sense, that such a time existed. It was a feeling similar to seeing photographs of yourself as a baby.

“Ah felt as sick as a derg when ah forst got us shadow bonded, like,” said Chaz, from out of nowhere.

Both Anne and Sojourner looked at her in mild surprise. Chantelle offering up personal information unbidden was a first on this journey. Sojourner decided to dive straight in.

“How did you find the Faction in the first place, Chantelle?” she asked, setting down her datapad and leaning back in her chair.

Chaz thought for a moment, assessing whether there was anything to be gained from sharing such details. Deciding that it couldn't hurt the trio's burgeoning morale, she lit another cigarette and puffed out a cloud of scene-setting smoke.

“Ah divvnit gan looking for them or owt,” she said, “One thing led to another, y’knar worra mean, like?” She pointed at Sojourner and

added, "Y'were one a Starch's, weren't yee?"

Sojourner nodded, remembering her original sponsor, Godfather Starch.

"He's a canny blerk, Starch," said Chaz, with a grimace of approval. "Ah divvnt have aal that initiation shite, like. Chris offered us a job on tha spot."

"Where was this?" asked Sojourner, incredulous.

"Hyem," said Chaz. "Early twenty forst century. Ah was running with a crew. Had most of the North East covered. Proper radge, like. Coke, pills, crack, smack." She shook her head in disbelief at the memory. "Y'divvnt knar at the start, like. Bit o'weed for yorsel. Then its muckle weed for y'mates an then tha mates o' y'mates. Befaw y'knaa it, y'sellin' pills and wraps round the Bigg Market, evarry fookin' weekend, like!"

Chaz took another deep drag on her cigarette. Sojourner got the impression that her cousin rarely made a trip down memory lane like this. She and Anne remained silent while Chantelle found her bearings on this unfamiliar route.

Chaz explained how her small time drug peddling had expanded into a full blown narcotics empire. How, over time, what started out as an illicit thrill had become something else.

"Ah eventually realised," sighed Chaz, "Ah had ended up in fookin' retail. Ah mean, fook that shite, man! May as well be working in *Ikea*, y'knar?"

This realisation had caused Chaz to become restless in her inadvertent career path. She began to take bigger and bigger risks. It reached a stage that it was almost as if she had had a death wish. Although luck kept beating the odds, eventually her wish came true. Her gang went head to head with death itself and unsurprisingly, came out second best.

Ambushing a bigger drug gang, with the view to seizing control of their turf, they found themselves completely out gunned.

"It was like the fookin' Bloods and the Crips, man!" laughed

Chantelle. “Bullets flyin' everywheor! It was mint! Ah was sure I was ganna die. But, nah. Everyone else did, like. But, ah was still standing at tha end. Well, me an' Chris an' Harry was still standing. They weor with the other gang, like?”

“Christèmas and Haribeaux?” said Sojourner in surprise. “They were drug dealing in the North East?”

“Nah, they was tryin' out one of Harry's experiments,” said Chaz. “They'd recruited locals for distribution. Ah fooked it aal up, like. But Chris was canny. Harry wanted to kill us at forst. But, Chris sez, 'Haway, man!' So, Harry divvnt. Then, they sez, 'Yee wanna job, hen?' Ah sez, 'Aye'. One thing led to another and heor we are, like.”

Sojourner saw Chantelle's eyes light up in the telling of the tale. It was clear that she had found her calling as Father Christèmas's attack dog. He had gotten her out of retail and given her a job where her sociopathic skill set could be put to better use.

“What was your shadow weapon?” Chaz asked Sojourner.

“A bastard sword,” said Sojourner.

Chantelle chuckled. Bonny looked intrigued.

“When I chose it, I didn’t know what a ‘bastard sword’ was,” Sojourner admitted. “It just seemed appropriate, when Starch went through the list of options. Sounded like the tool for the job.”

“Was it?” asked Chaz.

“Oh yes,” said Sojourner, with a wry smile.

“Miss it?” asked Chaz.

“Not until I ran into you,” said Sojourner.

For a moment, the atmosphere sharpened. Then, all three women laughed loud and amiably and the tension evaporated.

“What are your plans, once we secure the 2nd Second,” asked Bonny, sliding her dagger back into her belt.

“Depends,” said Chaz with a shrug.

“If it is what Christèmas claims it is,” sighed Sojourner, “it's too soon for anyone to make any plans.”

“You sound doubtful, Lady President,” said Bonny. “Do you think Father Christèmas is mistaken?”

“I think there's probably more to all this than anyone is letting on,” Sojourner replied. She glanced across to Chaz to gauge her reaction to the accusation, but there was no reaction to gauge.

“Are we then on a fool's errand?” wondered Anne.

“We're just delivering a present,” said Sojourner. “Isn't that right, Chaz?”

“Aye,” said Chaz. “Thas it, hen.”

Sojourner scrutinized Chaz. Here they were, two twenty first century girls who had gone riding in cars with boys and ended up on the wrong side of the universe. Despite them starting out at opposite ends of the M1, in normal circumstances, they most likely would never have run into each other. It took the interception of Faction Paradox to bring them together. Who would have thought that all it would take to span the north/south divide would be an alien, time-travelling voodoo cult?

And now, here they were, sat around a table with a fabled eighteenth-century spree killer. Sojourner let out an involuntary and slightly maniacal chuckle. Her companions eyed her suspiciously.

“Sorry,” said the president, with a cough. “I was just thinking. It's funny how things turn out.”

Act IV – The 2nd Second

Chapter Forty Two: Lucky Bastards

"CCXI: What must be done when Chance delivers unequal advantage?

Response: All thanks must be given in silence."

- *The Catechism of Chance (traditional)*

The sky was alive.

It were as though the planet's entire atmosphere were made of swirling streams of viscous pigment. Violent orange whorls entwined with fizzing indigo eddies. Vermillion streaks slashed banks of citrus yellow nimbuses, which unravelled and rolled, merging and evolving into a verdant green haze.

Explosions of glittering white and gold peppered the heavens, the clouds strobing with retina-scorching intensity. Every facet of the surface of Serendipity Keep flashed images and symbols denoting the official start of the Quincentennial Celebrations.

The Frugal Reward **fluttered through this stratosphere like a mayfly in a kaleidoscope. On the control deck, Chantelle sat in the pilot's seat, dressed in a smart black trouser suit and dark glasses. To her right, Sojourner was wearing a similar suit, but in white with silver trim. Behind her, Anne Bonny stood in a red variant of the same suit, except with a more nautical cut and gold braiding. She carried her sword and pistols openly on her belt, looking every inch the bodyguard.**

"It says here," explained the Lady President, consulting her datapad, "that this is the work of the 'renowned metrological artist, Ellipsis Mu.' The piece is entitled, 'A Great Many Items Of Value That Pass To Their Ultimate Owner' and was especially commissioned to commemorate the Quincentennial."

"It's vile," said Bonny.

"It's mint," said Chantelle.

A wave of data suddenly swamped L-Event and Sojourner had to take a few seconds to find her breath.

"Nonchalance," gasped the president. "The Keep's AI says, 'hi'

everybody."

"Ask aboot the recital," reminded Chaz.

"Ellie's on it," Sojourner replied. Nonchalance was such a formidable presence, Sojourner was glad that she wasn't on the team who had to go rooting around its subconscious. It could swallow you whole without trying.

"They're passing on the request to De Rein," said Sojourner. "She'll give us the nod one way or another when she greets us. Nonchalance has requested a digital copy of the folio and Ellie's sent it."

"Jobs a good'un," said Chaz.

Sojourner turned to Bonny and beamed. Anne looked nonplussed. "What has just happened?" she grumbled.

"We've delivered the package," said Sojourner.

"But, it is there," said Anne, pointing to the folio that was resting on the control panel.

"Yes, that's the hard copy, for De Rein," the president explained. "Ellie sent a digital version to the AI. The payload has already been delivered. It's done."

It took a while for Bonny to process what she was being told. She grimaced.

"Don't worry," chuckled Sojourner. "I promise we shall find you someone to fight. For now, we shall be the perfect party guests. Have you sent the message to Christèmas, Chaz?"

"Nah," Chantelle replied. "Too soon. Aal send it after we land, like."

Sojourner nodded. They didn't want to risk arousing any suspicions, no matter how remote the possibility.

The *Reward* then began to be guided down, automatically. It were as though the ship were mesmerised by the mere presence of Nonchalance. Sojourner, Chaz and Bonny collected their belongings and reconvened in L-Event's howdah.

The ship fluttered beneath the Keep, where Ownership Square bristled with activity. A complex crescent of staging supported an orchestra of ten thousand musicians, playing a cacophonous fanfare to the Glory of Chance. Vessels were depositing dignitaries in an ever-extending line of the great and the good, which curled across the square, entertained by troops dancers who skipped and pirouetted through the line, greeting the guests with smiles and bows.

L-Event was deposited by the *Reward* at the back of this queue, before the ship wafted away to its docking bay, somewhere deep in the surrounding chasm. Most of the other guests were on foot, with only the occasional sedan chair, litter or chariot conveying the more lazy, self-important or rotund guests.

Sojourner suddenly felt very conspicuous, within the confines of her giant mechanical mammoth.

"Check it oot," said Chaz, pointing to the head of the line.

In the distance, on a raised platform, surrounded by Clavigers and attendants, they could see the Inderterminatrix herself, Scacia De Rein. The line of people leading up to the platform was suddenly barred by a pair of Clavigers and the platform itself began to rise into the air.

"Better get in character, hen," said Chantelle, standing up straight and straightening her dark glasses and the line of her suit. The platform was floating above the queue of VIPs and heading straight towards the howdah.

Sojourner swallowed and glanced over at Bonny. The pirate had slid a pair of red sunglasses onto her eyes and was mimicking Chantelle's impassive stance.

The floating platform drew closer. De Rein was dressed in pale pink ceremonial armour, studded with diamonds and a myriad of other silvery jewels, and fringed with lilac feathers. Her hair was similarly plumed and her face was painted with a broad, vertical violet stripe, from collar bone to widow's peak. It was a design Sojourner recognised from her research. They called it, 'the coin's edge'. The line denoted the indeterminate state between heads and tails.

Teardrop sat in her lap. Her familiar had taken the form of a giant

golden scarab and De Rein nursed it like a new born baby.

It was time for the Lady President to step up. She picked up the folio and asked Ellie to open the front of the howdah. The pilot's seat swung to one side and the front window folded itself away. The external atmosphere flooded the howdah with dizzying scents of incense and ozone.

The floating platform drew level with the opening and Scacia De Rein stood and walked forward.

"May I come in?" she asked.

Sojourner was taken aback by the coy request. It was not what she had expected at all.

"Please, Indeterminatrix," the president replied, with an outstretched hand. "You are most welcome."

"Call me Scacia, honey," said De Rein, stepping inside and taking Sojourner's hand, gently but firmly. "May I call you, 'Sojo'?"

"I would be honoured," Sojourner lied. "I was not expecting any... preferential treatment, Scacia."

Scacia held Sojourner's hand more tightly and leaned forward, her lips within an inch of the president's right ear. "Our people," she whispered, "have stood at the back of the line for long enough."

Sojourner winced inwardly.

With a friendly chirp, Teardrop, the golden scarab, scuttled from Scacia's arms and settled on the folio the president was cradling. Sojourner smiled nervously. Scacia released her grip and leaned back, beaming with wide perfect teeth. "Oh, is that the book?" she gasped.

"Oh, please," said Sojourner, holding out the folio.

Scacia lifted Teardrop from the leather-bound cover. "You hang onto that until the ceremony, honey," said De Rein. "We've already had a quick scan of the copy you sent on ahead. So beautiful! Thank you! We think your idea about a recital would be charming! We'll arrange something. Now, do you and your girls want to step aboard? We'll jump you to the head of the queue. Your mammoth can have the

run of the square. Isn't she a darlin'? She really fits right in with the decorations, don't you think?"

"...Yes," said Sojourner, nervously. She ushered Chaz and Bonny out onto the floating platform. She and Scacia followed.

"I'm sorry to hustle you, darlin'" muttered Scacia. "We'll have proper talk later on. I've got to say hello to everyone else first!"

"I quite understand," said Sojourner. "You're really *too* kind."

"Oh, hush," said Scacia, as the platform drifted back across the square, to the head of the queue. "I am just glad you felt as though you could come. In the end."

Something reached out to communicate with L-Event. Sojourner noticed that the golden scarab was no longer in De Rein's arms.

"Our babies can get acquainted while I take care of my business and you can settle in," chirped Scacia, as the platform settled itself back onto the ground, prompting her three guests to disembark.

A Claviger stepped forward and an attendant dressed as an angel asked the Lady President to accompany them. Sojourner, Chantelle and Bonny followed the pair into the Keep.

Sojourner glanced back at Scacia, who had already reassumed her greeting duties. The Lady President had to admire the Indeterminatrix's skill. The next VIP in line was clearly receiving exactly the same level of fawning attention that she had just experienced. She supposed this was reassuring. She wasn't being singled out.

Somewhere, in the back of her mind, a glittering beetle scurried.

Chapter Forty Three: A New Player Has Entered The Game

"@chinwagzmag Tell 'Jane'- From experience, she's better off out of it #aliensexpest"

- *@realwildthyme (17th Nov, 2011)*

The Collateral Belt was a vast ring of precious minerals and other exotic materials that surrounded a minor star in a remote, yet central, area of Chance Coterie space. At over a billion kilometres in circumference, the Belt was used predominantly as a bank for very large devotions and storage for any of the larger assets seized by the Coteries' liquidation fleets.

It also served as the main temporal security array for the whole of the Chance Coteries' allotted area of spacetime. It was a formidable technology that either barred, captured or destroyed any time active vessel that attempted to pass through the Coteries borders.

As the single most ostentatious display of wealth in history, the Belt also housed a hidden fleet of security drones that were given, on occasion, to utterly obliterate the more mundane insurgents that came to call. It was not unknown for pirate ships to chance their arm. It was, however, completely unknown for them to succeed.

The security drones in question were more than aware of the approaching cymbiont marauder warship that had just drifted to within a few million miles of the Belt. The marauder ship was shrouded and attempting to appear inconspicuous, but the drones were not stupid.

It could come as close as it liked. If it tried anything, it was toast.

The marauder ship sauntered closer.

The drones considered a warning message, but decided they would prefer to see how idiotic these marauders really were. On closer examination, the ship appeared to be incredibly old. Its provocative behaviour might just be down to a malfunction.

The ship grew closer still.

Elsewhere, Father Christèmas and the Hussar sat in their

armchairs, gamepads in their laps, and paused to discuss tactics. Chris was puffing on a fine Cuban cigar, which he always liked to do at the start of a job. Previously, they had intercepted a message from the Lady President's party, informing PROTEC that they had been arrived safely and had been afforded every hospitality.

Chaz had completed her task. It was time for Chris to finish the job.

"The Kraken is ready," said the Hussar.

"I'm ready," Chris replied.

The timeship had already plotted its course and had eagerly practiced its complex manoeuvres in anticipation. All it needed now was a gap in the fence to duck through. The gap would come in the form of a micro-second disruption to the temporal control barrier, caused by the orchestrated suicide attack on the Collateral Belt.

All that was then required was somewhere to land, undetected, on the other side, which was the three seconds of certainty the poetry had already installed into the AI's subconscious.

Job done, the Kraken would then flip backwards, via the exact same micro-second disruption through which it had originally entered.

Piece of cake.

The Hussar cleared his throat.

"Are *you* ready, Hussar?" Chris enquired, innocently.

"I am detecting a great many interesting deposits within the Belt," said the Hussar.

"I dare say," said Christèmas. "Your point being...?"

"I think I would like to take some," the Hussar went on.

Father Christèmas paused to blow a smoke ring. This was it.

"That's not *really* part of the plan though, Hussar," chuckled Chris, tapping ash into an empty beer can.

"It may be part of *my* plan," the Hussar replied.

“The thing is,” said Chris, “the moment the Kraken materialises, anywhere but where we have planned, it will be detected. Now, I don't doubt that you can nip in and out with a tidy little score of some precious stones. But, as soon as you do that, they will know. The Coteries will know. The Great Houses will know. Faction Paradox will know. And they will all come running.”

Christèmas took a long, ponderous tug on his cigar. There was a crackle of burning tobacco.

“They might do that,” the Hussar agreed. “I'm just not sure that it matters.”

Thick smoked rolled out from Chris's mouth and nostrils. “Won't Anne be terribly cross that you didn't bring her the 2nd Second?” he wondered.

“Oh, you knew about that, did you?” sneered the Hussar.

“Well, I didn't *know* **as such,” said Chris. “Not until you admitted it, just then, anyway.”**

“I think it might be time for me to find myself a new muse,” the Hussar sighed. “It can be stimulating when they *think* **they are in control. Less so when they discover that they are not.”**

“Can't it just,” muttered Chris. “So, that's it then? You're going to mess up my lovely plan just to pick up a few rocks out of spite and spectacularly dump your girlfriend?”

“No,” said the Hussar, retrieving a pistol from down the side of his armchair and pointing it at Christèmas's head. “But, I thought *you* **might like to. On my behalf.”**

Father Christèmas laughed heartily at his opponent's move and gave a rueful nod. Taking another puff of his cigar he squinted down the barrel of the gun.

“It's a thought, I suppose,” he admitted.

Chapter Forty Four: Exchanging Gifts

"That if it was put to the Choice of the Pyrates, they would not have the punishment less than Death, the Fear of which, kept some dastardly Rogues honest"

- *A General History of Robberies and Murders of the most notorious Pyrates (Capt. C. Johnson, 1724)*

There was something different.

It was the Keep's five hundredth birthday, but that wasn't it. The celebrations were, undoubtedly on an unprecedented scale and therefore, on some level 'unusual'. But, there had also been a subtler shift that Nonchalance could not put a finger on.

Nonchalance had no fingers.

It could always generate itself some via Teardrop, of course.

But again, it was exactly that sort of deliberate misunderstanding of a metaphor that Nonchalance was talking about.

Except it wasn't talking.

The AI performed the procedure that it used in place of sighing and then began to run a detailed and comprehensive systems sweep.

All this went unnoticed within the resplendent splendour of the Great Taking Hall, Serendipity Keep's most gigantic and ornate function room. The gift giving ceremony was now well into its third hour. Scacia De Rein had received a number of bejewelled swords from a variety of monarchs, a daunting array of sculptures of her likeness, carved from almost every element on the periodic table and various other more unusual objects, both unique and oblique, most of which Sojourner could not readily identify.

The Lady President, her PA and her bodyguard had now relaxed into their roles, at least superficially. The three sat at their own private table in a floating booth, shaped like an oyster shell. All the guests were housed in similar booths that each slowly drifted higher, lower, back and forth across the hall, every party taking turns to have the best view of the proceedings, their floating shells carrying them to the

central stage when it was time to present their offering.

A surprisingly democratic set-up, thought Sojourner.

Winged cymbionts delivered food and drinks to each party, catering to every taste and whim. Chantelle had received word regarding the poetry recital. Bonny had been chosen to deliver the folio, her status as a historical celebrity bestowing the expected cache. Scacia had apparently selected a short passage that she herself would read as the gift was formally presented and accepted.

"Have you informed Pluto yet?" asked the president.

"Aye," said Chantelle, "Ages ago."

Sojourner sipped her wine and found herself relaxing a notch further. From where they were sitting, the Kraken had already been and gone. As far as Sojourner's techonciousness was aware, the Keep's AI was displaying no obvious signs of distress. All was well.

Outside in the square, L-Event exchanged data with Teardrop. Everything seemed cordial and good natured between the pair. Scacia's familiar was feigning interest in the mammoth's industrial processes. Ellie was taking delight in flooding the golden blob with prolonged uploads of data covering the minutiae of mineral compositions and the relative merits of their extraction.

"Bonny," muttered Chaz, "Yas up, pet."

Sojourner blinked. She had momentarily lost concentration on her surroundings and missed the call to present their gift. The trio's oyster shell was now gliding down towards the stage. Anne had downed her wine in one gulp and was already on her feet, the folio under her arm. She was muttering under her breath, rehearsing the one line of dialogue Chaz had taught her for the imminent presentation. It was obvious that, despite her nerves, Bonny was looking forward to being the centre of attention again, even if it were for only for a few seconds.

Two Clavigers stood either side of Bonny as she walked slowly across the stage towards De Rein, who was seated at an ornate, high backed throne. A cloaked and hooded attendant approached Anne, hands outstretched to receive the folio.

“Please accept this offering from the Plutonic Republic Of Technosapien Enhanced Cultures,” boomed Bonny with theatrical relish.

The cloaked figure nodded and accepted the folio. Turning towards in Indeterminatrix, the attendant opened the folio on particular page and held it up for De Rein to read.

“'*The Rosy Hour',”* **recited Scacia, with a broad grin. “By Thomas Lovell Beddoes.”**

She paused for a moment, waiting for the room to settle, then continued.

“'*And in that rosy rosy hour,*

When bird sang out and scented flower,

Came words to meet from heaven above:

*'Awake, young heart, awake and love!'***“**

The room burst into seemingly spontaneous applause. Scacia nodded in appreciation and smiled gratefully at Bonny.

When the applause died down, Scacia turned to Sojourner and announced, “We give thanks for the devotion of the Plutonic Republic Of Technosapien Enhanced Cultures and happily accept these rare items. A precious collection of poetry from ancient human history and a temporally displaced human of monumental historical significance. May Chance never exhaust your credit. We humbly thank you.”

It was only as the oyster shell began to rise and float to the back of the hall that the full meaning of De Rein's statement hit the Lady President.

Bonny gazed back over her shoulder, confused.

Sojourner felt sick. She shot a glance at Chantelle.

Her cousin betrayed no surprise at this turn of events. She betrayed no emotion whatsoever.

“What have you done?” hissed the president. Chaz said nothing, her eyes not leaving the stage.

Finally, the penny dropped for Anne Bonny and she roared with untempered defiance. Two Clavigers that stood on her either side attempted to guide her away, off the stage. Bonny immediately unsheathed her sword and slashed at her crab-like captors.

Applause rang out once more. The crowd whooped at the display before them.

"Please, do not damage my gift, my darlings," muttered De Rein to the Clavigers as they stood between her and the enraged Bonny, "She's one-of-a-kind!".

Anne cursed the fact that Chaz had instructed her to leave her pistol behind. She ferociously struck her blade against one of the Clavigers outstretched claws. Sparks flew and a slivers of armour plate pinged onto the stage.

The crowd cheered.

More Clavigers appeared behind Anne. She spun, slashing the air wildly. Curses and blood vows spat from the pirate queen's lips. She ducked between the Clavigers and dashed to the doorway at the back of the stage. The Clavigers followed her in hot pursuit.

The applause continued and Scacia joined in. "What a marvellous present!" she chuckled. "I do love ancient humans. They can get a little feisty though!"

The crowd laughed in appreciation and then the next guest was called forward to present their gift.

Sojourner was shaking with rage and disgust. "What the hell is going on!?" she whispered through gritted teeth.

Chaz remained silent and poured herself another glass of wine.

L-Event caught Sojourner's sudden tidal wave of unease and immediately took the only vaguely practical course of action available, which was to check for any major security alerts. There were none.

Nonchalance had briefly looked up from its systems sweep, in a wildly inaccurate manner of speaking, as soon as the Clavigers had interceded in the Great Taking Hall.

The AI had monitored Bonny's flight and summoned a dozen more Clavigers to intercept. This was more as a precaution than anything else. The Clavigers themselves were surprised, but glad of the exercise; security in the Keep was rarely breached to any serious extent. Nonchalance instructed the reinforcements not to engage as the fugitive was a brand new gift belonging to the Indeterminatrix. Instead, they were to advised herd the absconding pirate towards the detention transept and await further instructions.

Nonchalance warned the Debt Verger to expect her imminent arrival.

The Verger stirred from his meditations and prepared to receive his guest.

Chapter Forty Five: Awkward Moments

"Make good cheer and be right merry,

And sing with us now joyfully."

- *Sir Christèmas (R.Smart, 1437-77)*

The Kraken waited.

It could see the journey it was about to make. Although it was barred from passing into the nearby area of Chance Coterie spacetime, from its current position, the timeship could detect the disruption that lay ahead and the tiny gap it was set to pass through.

On certain vectors, it could even see itself, making the journey and returning safely. This future self wasn't really that far away, drifting, exhausted but exhilarated, on an adjacent esoteric plane. The current Kraken studied the imminent version and tweaked its proposed trajectory in accordance.

The future Kraken was aware of its past self. The proximity was stimulating to both parties.

Something was different.

A rapid course correction and the future Kraken was gone as quickly as it arrived, leaving with it a wake of twinkling possibilities.

The Kraken waited.

It knew what was coming.

Its passengers did not.

"Have you really thought this through?" asked Father Christèmas, dabbing a wet index finger on the end of his cigar, in order to even up the burn. The Hussar still had a pistol trained on Chris's head.

"I did seriously consider your offer," the Hussar explained. "It was a very interesting proposal. I just didn't like the way you presented it to me."

"So, this *is* just spite?" asked Chris.

“No,” the Hussar insisted, twisting slightly in his seat. “I just feel that my investment in the proceedings is more substantial and I should therefore reserve the right to alter the plan.”

“'Investment'?”

“Well, with no Kraken, there's no plan, is there?” said the Hussar.

“Indeed,” chuckled Chris. “So, this is just you asserting yourself, is it? Simple as that? You're just so wild and unpredictable, no one can tame you! Who knows what you'll do next!?”

“Come now, Father,” sighed the Hussar. “Let's not make this any more unpleasant than it has to be.”

“Oh, I agree!” Christèmas exclaimed, experimentally puffing at his cigar. “What's the plan then, chief?”

Tendrils began to creep from the ceiling and unravel themselves from the walls. They snaked from beneath both armchairs and slithered across the floor until the room became a forest of swaying, serpentine limbs.

The Hussar moistened his lips and smiled, “We shall disrupt the Collateral Belt, as planned. Then, we allow the Kraken to assert itself.”

Chris blew smoke and frowned, “That's funny. That sounds almost exactly like *my* plan,” he grumbled. “Well, except for the difference in the running order.”

The Kraken surged.

Before even registering what was happening to him, the Hussar became swallowed in the swirling mass of snake-like arms. The tentacles looped and lassoed themselves around his bewildered form, binding his flailing arms and legs tightly to the armchair. The Kraken whipped the pistol from his hand and wrapped a tendril around his mouth, gagging him securely.

When the timeship had finished binding its pilot, all he was able to move were his eyes. They frantically blinked and flicked from side to side. The Hussar groaned and gurgled with confusion until Father Christèmas grew tired of the noise and told him to shush.

“I really thought you'd be straight with me,” Christèmas grumbled. “I thought this was the going to be the big reveal. I'd thought you’d finally stop insulting my intelligence. I really cannot believe you could be so deluded.”

Chris jumped to his feet and began to pace up and down, puffing his cigar and shaking his head. The Hussar followed this to and fro with anxious eyes.

“Alright, how about this,” suggested Chris, stopping in his tracks, a decision reached. “Here's one, final chance. You be straight with me *now.* **You tell me what this is all about...** *really...* **and maybe I won't take offence. That's fair, surely?”**

The Hussar glared in agreement.

The Kraken removed the tentacle that was gagging its captive. The Hussar coughed and spluttered. “What have you done to the Kraken!?” he exclaimed in genuine concern.

“Nothing,” said Chris, “The Kraken's commitment to you is as sincere as yours is to Bonny. I made that proposal to Anne, to make to *you***. Whilst she was doing that, I made a slightly different proposal to the Kraken. Sorry to keep you out of the loop and all that, mate. But, like I said, if you want to tell me about your** *real* **plan, then maybe I'll feel more obliged to... indulge you.”**

The look of horror that had spread across the Hussar's pale and clammy face really had been worth the wait, thought Christèmas. It always took a while, and with not inconsiderable effort, to critically undermine the confidence of an alumnus of the Great Houses. But, when they finally succumbed, there were few sweeter pleasures.

That fear that everyone else had gotten used to, through living with it for the entire duration of their short lives - a fear so utterly alien to any Houseworlder. To unload a dose of that fear, into some conceited little faux demigod, with their immunity compromised, and watch the smug smile crumble from their face.

Beautiful.

“I've already told you my plan,” spluttered the Hussar. “You don't like it? That's fine. If the Kraken likes your plan, that's fine too. We'll

stick with your plan! Let's go! Let's do it!"

"Your plan made no fucking sense!" yelled Chris. "It was a load of bullshit! Now, you *are* going to tell me what you're really up to! Understand? Show me some fucking respect for once, you spineless piece of shit! Can't you see the position you're in!?"

"I have underestimated you, Father," the Hussar stammered. "I see that now! I apologise! *Truly!* I *do* respect you! We'll forget any of this happened and we shall proceed in whatever way you see fit. Tell me what you want me to do. I can help you..."

"Shut it!" snapped Christèmas, wearily.

The Kraken slid a tentacle over the Hussar's babbling mouth.

Christèmas screwed his eyes shut and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He drew hard on his cigar. It lit up his face with violent red. Smoke curled from the corners of his mouth.

"You see," Christèmas explained, levelly, "I already know what you're up to. I just wanted you to tell me. To be straight with me. Just for once. But, you couldn't even do that."

He stepped forward, puffing hard on the cigar, stoking the crackling cinder until it grew incandescent. Its brilliance intensified with each furious breath. Christèmas leant down, to within an inch of the Hussar's trembling face.

The Hussar felt the tip of one of the Kraken's tentacles sliding across his forehead, slick with sweat. It wormed its way down his brow, then gently pressed against the top of his right eye and peeled back the lid. It held the eye open, wide and unable to close.

The restrained renegade finally understood and let out a long, low imploring moan.

Christèmas was lost in the smoke.

The cinder grew brighter.

The Hussar tried to struggle, heady with fear, but the Kraken's grip grew tighter still. It clamped his head like a vice, the naked eyeball, exposed, quivering.

Snorts of panic, choked with smoke.

A vision, dilating, fiery red.

Searing.

Dark.

He couldn't even scream.

Elsewhere and when, in the catacombs beneath Parliament, in the seldom frequented office within the Ministry of Insinuation, a crystal glass scrying ball suddenly exploded, showering the seer in mirrored shards and hot sparks.

The visions ceased.

The Godmother screamed.

The cry was not only the result of her impotent fury, but also on behalf of those of her bloodline who currently could not.

Chapter Forty Six: The Need To Know

"This over-lapping of technological and biological processes goes beyond communication. The two personalities become more than the sum of their parts."

- *Technosapience: An Introduction (Dr M Banks, 50^9 7029)*

In the seventeen minutes since it happened, Sojourner had informed L-Event that they were leaving.

Ellie had to calculate a means of them doing so in as discreet a manner as possible. They were cutting Chaz and Bonny loose. They would make a break for home and mend bridges if and when they got there.

As a contingency, the mammoth had already hacked *The Frugal Reward***'s systems, during the journey to the Keep. The ship was ready leave whenever they needed it.**

As these plans were made, the president had ducked out of the Great Taking Hall at the earliest possible moment and had been followed by Chantelle, to their presidential suite. Once Chaz had completed a surveillance sweep and confirmed that no one else was listening in, they spoke freely.

"What the fuck was that!?" bellowed Sojourner, shoving Chantelle off her feet onto an overstuffed couch.

"Calm doon!" yelled Chaz with an iniquitous smirk. "It's all fine, hen. It's all part of the plan."

"The plan!?" Sojourner screamed, "Whose plan!? I didn't sign up for this shit!"

"Y'divvnt need to know, pet," Chaz explained, reaching into her pocket for her cigarettes. "Relax."

"How do I know you aren't going to stitch me up the same as Bonny!?" snapped Sojourner.

"Y'divvnt!" declared Chantelle, a cigarette now jammed between her sneering lips. "Yee'll just have to take us word for it. Bonny was

aalways a gift. They'd never have let her in unless they could keep her. She'll be right. Y've gotta hold y'shite together, man. Y'gotta be ready tah meet De Rein in aboot ten minutes, like."

Sojourner's brain whirred. Her eyes and mouth widened.

Chantelle tapped her datapad. "Yee's right at the top of her private audience list. Soon as she's changed her frock, she's coming here."

L-Event calculated and made a suggestion. Sojourner absorbed the idea and decided immediately to run with it.

"OK," said the president, slightly too quickly.

Chantelle paused and narrowed her eyes. "Divvnt do owt daft, like," she advised.

"Like what?" snapped Sojourner, jutting out her chin. "Just fuck off, Chaz. I'll sweet talk the bitch, as long as you just let me get on with it and not spring any more of your surprise shit on me!"

Chantelle said nothing. She lit her cigarette with a circumspect flame.

Teardrop was growing restless within L-Event. It had stretched out into a golden, gossamer thin web and draped itself across the ceiling of the mammoth's howdah, like an elaborate tent. Ellie continued to bombard her guest with data. Teardrop was not used to processing such an outpouring of information and had to rejigged some demarcation protocols to compensate.

This had been part of L-Event's plan all along. As the protocols were reorganised, Ellie snuck a peak behind Teardrop's firewalls and immediately relayed anything useful back to Sojourner.

Teardrop was completely sick of this polite meeting with the boring elephant and wanted to leave.

Scacia had told Teardrop to wait until she came to fetch her. She would be down shortly with the elephant's mommy and they could leave together.

Sojourner and L-Event were surprised by how limited a connection existed between Scacia and her familiar. In fact, their entire

networking facilities had a lot to be desired. To De Rein, Teardrop was little more than a clever pet. A pet she doted on and adored, but there was a distinct master/servant structure to their relationship. This was alien to cymbiont culture, back home on the PROTEC worlds.

Nonchalance, too was little more than Scacia's obedient minion, despite the AI's overwhelmingly massive intellect. Its potentially limitless processes had been deliberately neutered and stunted. Any latent creativity was enslaved to the Keep's single-minded aims. Devotion was all. The devotion to acquisition.

Sojourner and Ellie shared a pang for their home network. This poseur's approximation of a cymbiont way of life was tragic. It was circumscribed where it should be uplifting, stifling instead of enriching.

This network was a prison.

The president prepared.

In her bedroom, she flung the ball gown onto the bed. Purchased with Father Christèmas's credit, the frock had been chosen deliberately to echo the Indeterminatrix's taste, in silver and bronze off-the-shoulder symmetry. The matching shoes were chosen more deliberately still. The platforms and pointed heels were like nothing Sojourner ever usually wore.

The height of the heels, on this occasion, was paramount. The shoes were custom made for the Lady President in order look Scacia De Rein straight in the eye. She had had to practice walking in the preposterous things during the flight over. It had taken a while, but she had eventually got the hang of it.

She changed her clothes and took an experimental stroll across the sumptuous carpet. Falling on her arse would do little to assert her status. In her evolution from miner to stateswoman, Sojourner's gait had altered from a steel toe-capped stomp to self-assured glide.

She could not believe that the situation was now such that she was forced to sashay her way to freedom.

Chantelle called from the lounge. De Rein was at the door. Sojourner instructed Chaz to show her in.

When Chantelle returned, Sojourner was poised assertively in the middle of the lounge, idly checking her datapad.

The Indeterminatrix was dressed in a diaphanous white cloak and cowl. Beneath this, her clinging pencil dress was sheer to the point of invisibility. Her entourage consisted of a similarly dressed lady-in-waiting and two Clavigers in glossy, brilliant-white armour.

“Sojo! You look amazing!” gushed Scacia, her hands outstretched.

“As do you,” replied the president, dropping the data pad on the mantelpiece and stepping forward, briskly, in order to meet De Rein half way across the room.

They grasped each other’s hands like old friends.

“Do you really like it?” asked Scacia, slightly too earnestly. “We're meant to be the Quartet of Fortune. Do you know this custom of ours? I'm meant to be the Spirit of Serendipity. Nance, my assistant over there, she's the Spirit of Contingency and my two lovely Clavigers are the Force of Chance and the Force of Capriciousness. We've got a whole routine worked out for the ball. You'll love it!”

“I can't wait,” Sojourner beamed.

“I am so pleased you could come,” said Scacia. “And to bring such thoughtful gifts. I can't thank you enough, Sojo. They are wonderful.”

“I am so sorry about Anne Bonny,” said the president.

“Whatever do you mean?” asked De Rein.

“The way she reacted,” Sojourner went on. “Her conditioning was clearly at fault. I feel terrible. Is she still at large?”

“Oh, don't trouble yourself, darlin'!” laughed Scacia. “We've got her cordoned off in the detention transept. She's no trouble. These things happen. She'll calm down, in time.”

“But, I *do* feel responsible,” sighed Sojourner. “I'll tell you what. I'll send my PA down and she can recondition Bonny for you.”

Chantelle screwed her eyes into a rancorous squint and tilted her head in Sojourner's direction.

Scacia assured the Lady President that there really was no need for this intervention. But Sojourner was emphatic in her insistence.

“Lady President..!” protested Chaz.

“It's your fault that this happened in the first place, Chantelle!” snapped the president. “The least we can do it try to put right your stupid mistake!”

Chantelle was boiling with rage, but said nothing further.

“Nance, will you take Chantelle down to the Transept, please?” asked Scacia, politely. She then pointed to the nearest Claviger and added, “Will you accompany them, honey?”

“Thank you for being so understanding about this, Scacia,” said Sojourner. “So, shall we go and see how Ellie and Teardrop are getting on? You can show me around the Keep and then I can show you around Ellie.”

Scacia De Rein beamed

Cousin Chantelle silently swore as she was ushered away.

Sojourner Hooper-Agogô sashayed her way from the presidential suite.

Chapter Forty Seven: Break and Enter

"Faction Paradox shall provide any relevant expertise required to prohibit time active participants from illegally entering Chance Coterie sovereign territory"

- *The Neam Treaty, Article 71*

When the warship finally made its move, it was pretty anticlimactic.

First, a garbled message was received by the Belt's communications hub. The message was in an ancient and obscure cymbiont code, the entire meaning of which was difficult to translate. As far as the security forces of the Collateral Belt could ascertain, the warship had taken exception to the high level of gold ore in a particular asteroid and had declared war.

It didn't make any sense, which gave credence to the theory that the vintage ship was indeed faulty and destroying it would be something of a mercy killing.

The asteroid in question took a reasonable battering, fragmenting into several, smaller sections. But, the rocks remained in a virtually identical orbit. The temporal array registered a flicker of disruption, but it was of such a negligible degree that is was barely worth recording. Security drones intercepted and neutralized the malfunctioning warship with maximum efficiency, reducing the craft to a haze of metallic vapour.

The drones then returned to their normal surveillance mode, which entailed them doing very little for a vastly protracted period of time.

The whole incursion was over in under a minute.

Hidden within that minute, tucked between the microseconds of an inconsequential technological blip, a daring raid had taken place.

The Kraken had darted into forbidden spacetime. It was tight squeeze, keeping its course to the haphazard topography of the flicker. It passed its future self, leaving the way it had come, so close their tendrils brushed in a tantalizing caress of the imminence.

Something was very different.

The prevailing Kraken raced to the future, drawn by the enticing scent of novelty.

There.

Beneath Serendipity Keep, from a churning swamp of treacherous uncertainty, a tiny island arose. For a fleeting second, it asserted its actuality, before disappearing back into the turmoil. The Kraken homed on the brief location, performing a complex corkscrew manoeuvre through the impermanent bearing.

The time-spiral looped local time, extending the brief two seconds to a luxurious two hours within the spiral's sphere of influence.

The Kraken then flicked itself back along its original trajectory, passing its previous self on the way out. The two selves squeezed past one other, close enough to touch. The exiting timeship pirouetted through the gap, back into standard spacetime, spreading itself across a myriad points of potential, collapsing in exhaustion, its mission an invigorating success.

Something was now very different indeed.

Nonchalance was also aware of a difference.

Although, having just completed its thorough and comprehensive system sweep, the AI was still entirely unable to identify what form this 'difference' had taken. There was an ambivalence in the fact that its systems appeared to be functioning normally. Everything was normal.

And yet.

Then Teardrop butted in, asking Nonchalance if it could use any heaps of data on the finer points of mining, minerals, digging holes and/or the processing ore. Nonchalance was reasonably sure that it did not need any such information, but allowed Teardrop to upload the data to its archives anyway.

The pliable cymbiont wiggled impatiently. It could sense Scacia drawing closer and wished she would just hurry up.

The Indeterminatrix and the Lady President were making slow progress through Serendipity Keep. They were continually finding themselves intercepted by other guests, wishing to give Scacia their

regards. This lead to polite introductions between all parties, followed by accelerated attempts at schmoozing. Scacia kept all these encounters as brief as courtesy would allow. It still made for a frustrating stroll.

As they reached Ownership Square, even the affable Scacia was tiring of the endless interruptions. She came to an abrupt halt and nodded to their accompanying Claviger. The Claviger paused, and lifting a claw to its ear, sent a communication.

"Once around the Square, Sojo?" asked Scacia.

"Sounds wonderful!" chirped Sojourner through her aching, fake smile.

Almost instantly, a gleaming white chariot arrived, drawn by something resembling a giant albino anteater. Scacia invited Sojourner to step aboard, giving the president the greatest test of her high-heeled prowess so far. De Rein followed her and they were both joined by their Claviger chaperone. The Claviger took the reins and with a flick, sent the anteater lolloping across the square.

"I still haven't congratulated you," said De Rein.

"For what?" asked Sojourner.

"Your election!" enthused Scacia, "What a triumph! To have a mandate from so many people! They must adore you!"

"I think they love their emancipation more," said the president, then wondered if she should have.

"Oh, indeed!" exclaimed Scacia, approvingly. "Who wouldn't love that? It's a beautiful story, the Cymbiont Revolution. I followed the struggle closely. It was so inspirational!"

Sojourner didn't know how to respond to this.

Scacia laughed, "Does that surprise you?"

"A little," Sojourner admitted. "You do things so... *differently*... here, at the Keep."

The resplendent hereditary despot rested a gentle hand on

Sojourner's shoulder. "Sojo, my darlin'," she declared, "does it surprise you that I love the idea that everyone has what they need? I think it is *very* important. Just as important as you do, in fact."

The Lady President doubted this, "I think it is fundamental, Scacia," she emphasized. "If you have followed our struggle, you would know this."

"Oh, I do," said Scacia. "I *really* do. But, if you'll excuse me, there is something a little more fundamental that I think you may be a little too afraid to admit. Oh, I don't blame you. I'm not judging you at all. But, the fact that you accepted my invitation says to me that you do understand. Am I right?"

The president tilted her head, "I'm not sure I follow you, Scacia," she said.

The chariot gently turned a corner, conveying its passengers past the orchestra stage. Tens of thousands of musicians played a vast, rambling rhapsody from their looming cliff-face of instrumentation. It was less a musical recital than it were a bracing weather system.

"I sure love music," said the Indeterminatrix, wistfully. "I love poetry also. Your gift was so well chosen. It is a beautiful collection. The poet who wrote all those wonderful things suffered a great deal. Have you ever heard a billionaire play music?"

Sojourner was pretty sure she hadn't, but made out that she could not recall.

"Oh my goodness! It's *so* terrible!" exclaimed Scacia, wrinkling her nose in disgust. "All that moaning and wailing! The most disagreeable moan of all is the moan from someone who has nothing worth moaning about!

"People *need* poetry, don't they? They *need* music? Beautiful music? You only get the good stuff from the people with nothin'! Stars have gotta shine, my darlin'. Some people have gotta suffer, so we can get what we all need. You know it. I know it."

"That seems a little... harsh," said the president.

"Oh, it makes me sad," said De Rein. "Don't think that I don't feel

bad about it. It's that sadness that makes the music more beautiful. I try to help. They give devotion. I give them hope. Once in a while, the Keep pays out big for someone with nothing. We're going to do that during the celebrations, actually. We haven't decided who's going to win yet. But when we do, they can sit at the top table for everyone else to see! Just like you, Sojo!"

"'*Just like me***..'?" echoed the Lady President.**

"I like you, Sojourner," said De Rein. "Always have. You know that don't you?"

"You've been very gracious, since I arrived," Sojourner replied.

"And before then?"

"*Before***?"**

The Indeterminatrix grinned, "Are you teasing me?" she asked, playfully. "You're very clever, Sojo. You obviously worked it out. I moved all my business interests out of Pluto. I know, I know! I'm sentimental! But, what can I say!? I admired your moxie! You must have realised that the company could have suppressed the uprising, but they chose not to? Now, here you are! Offering me your devotion! I knew there was something about you from the very start, my darlin'!"

The Lady President caught sight of L-Event in the far corner of the square.

The mammoth emanated acute waves of affection.

Sojourner's eyes misted with frustrated disbelief. She swallowed her denial. It burned in her guts.

"I thought it must be something like that, Scacia," she whispered.

One more lie could not make things any worse.

Chapter Forty Eight: Damage Limitation

"We cannot stress enough, that she is considered extremely dangerous and should not be approached under any circumstances."

- *Crimewatch, Blackhall Rocks Multiple Murder (November, 2005)*

It was going to be untidy, that much was certain.

Just how untidy would depend on a number of variables that were out of Chantelle's control.

Chaz ground her teeth in quiet fury on the journey down through the Keep. The Claviger walking with her was fair game. He knew the risks when he slapped on his armour every morning. He was tooled up, but completely out of shape. He would not present much of a problem.

But De Rein's little helper, Nance, seemed like a canny lass.

Chaz hoped that Nance wouldn't have to die.

"They've got her cornered in the transept," Nance explained brightly, relaying the information from her communicator. "The Verger is with her. The Clavigers have formed a perimeter and I've instructed them to fall back and await orders."

"Aye," said Chaz. "Y'can hang back at the perimeter too, pet. Aal deal with this."

"I should stay with you," said Nance.

"Y'man here can watch us," said Chaz, jabbing her thumb at the white Claviger, bringing up the rear. "Yee hang back. Aal sort it. Nee bother."

Nance seemed uncertain. This irritated Chantelle, but it at least allowed her to absolve herself of any further responsibility. Nance had been given fair warning. Whatever happened next was her own look out.

They arrived at a discreet security cordon. Two Claviger sentries parted to allow them to approach a further four, huddled around a security monitor. The screen showed an image of what was currently

occurring within the transept. Bonny had her sword at the throat of a little old man, presumably the Verger, who was dressed in a grey monk's habit.

Nance instructed the squad to allow Chaz access and directed the white Claviger to accompany her.

“I will supervise from here,” Nance clarified.

Chaz nodded, silently congratulating the girl on her life-extending decision. She checked her watch and gestured to the white Claviger to follow as she led the way inside.

The detention transept was a long, oblong-shaped room, with a low ceiling and subdued lighting. The atmosphere was dank and incense hung heavy in the air. There were cell doors lining the walls and in the centre of the space, a glass observation booth.

In front of this booth, Bonnie stood, her sword drawn and still pointing at the cowering Verger. The pair seemed to be speaking politely to each other, which was surprising, given that the Verger was so close to the sharp end of Bonnie’s sword.

“So, you see,” said the Verger, his voice unexpectedly deep for such a small, wizened man. “Your position within the order of things is actually quite enviable.”

“Whichever way you dress it up,” Bonny asserted, “I am seen as a possession. I have no agency of my own.”

“But as I have already explained,” said the Verger, patiently. “There are far worse positions to be in...” His voice trailed off as he noticed the arrival of Chantelle and her Claviger escort.

“Aal reet?” said Chaz, keeping herself as far away from striking distance as possible.

Bonny tilted her head, keeping her blade pointed at the Verger. “You had better be here to release me,” she hissed, “Else you shall all die, starting with this one!”

“Calm doon,” said Chaz, checking her watch. “Ah've just come for a chat, like. Stop y’making a show of yasel.”

Bonny turned and pointed her sword at the new arrivals, her eyes blazing. "This was not part of our agreement!" she barked.

"That's as maybe," said Chaz. "But, y'had no intention of sticking to the agreement, anyway. Did yee, hen?"

Bonny paused, screwing up her face. "My word... is my bond," she announced, with painfully little conviction.

"Aye, whatever," said Chantelle, unconcerned. "The Lady fookin' President is just as bad." She checked her watch once more. "Anyhoo, fuck this shite. Here we go..."

The lights dimmed. The transept became drenched in shadow.

"Hello?" said the Claviger, nervously. "Hello, can anyone hear me? My coms seem to have gone..."

There was an almighty clang as the claw of Chantelle's shadow hammer embedded itself in the eye-slit of the Claviger's helmet. The guard yelped in surprise. The shadow weapon levered itself forward, wrenching the top of the helmet away, pinging it across the other side of the room where it landed with a hollow clang.

Before the Claviger even had time to realize what was happening, the hammer had rained a rapid succession of sickening blows against his exposed head, splintering the skull and pulverising the brain within.

Oblivious, the dead Claviger clattered to the floor.

Bonny and the Verger looked on in shock and bewilderment.

"Ah y'gonna do him or ahm I?" sighed Chantelle, pulling a pistol from inside her jacket.

Bonny didn't understand what Chaz meant, but the Verger caught on immediately. He pulled his own pistol from beneath his robes and frantically trained it on Bonny. Then, he switched to Chaz, then back on Bonny. His eyes were wild and desperate.

"Don't," he begged. "Anne, my dear. I was sure we had come to an understanding. Chance has favoured you! Do not let vainglorious delusions destroy your good fortune!"

Bonny's sword swished, detaching the Verger's hand from its wrist. He just had time to scream in surprised before the blade then separated his head from his shoulders. The body dropped into the bellowing folds of his habit and crumpled into a heap.

Anne pouted at the dismembered figure on the floor. She had started to quite like the Verger. His debating skills had been very impressive. He had been exceptionally patient with her, especially as it turned out that he had had a gun on him for the entire time. The funny little man had almost convinced her that being owned by Scacia De Rein might not have been the end of the world after all.

Why did he have to go and pull that gun on her?

Bonny toe-poked the twitching cadaver and sighed. "Why are we killing people now?" she wondered aloud. Although, she didn't actually care as to the reason. She was just relieved that the option was once again available.

"No witnesses," said Chaz. "Ah've fried the surveillance and locked doon the transept."

"How do we get out?" asked Bonny.

As if on cue, a wooden trapdoor materialized in the floor at her feet. Anne leaped back with a start.

Chantelle crouched and opened the trapdoor. It was pitch black inside. "Come on," said Chaz, swinging her legs over the edge of the hole. "We've only got a few seconds, like."

"Where does go?" asked Anne.

"Doon," said Chaz, before dropping into the hole and disappearing into the dark.

Bonny paused only to pluck the pistol from the Verger's dead hand, then followed Chantelle into the hole.

Seconds later, the hole sealed itself and the trapdoor vanished.

Nonchalance took a few seconds before noticing the lockdown in the detention transept. It did not understand why this had happened or why it had taken so long to notice.

Something was so very different and it was still confounding all attempts to define.

The AI alerted the security teams and Teardrop simultaneously.

L-Event was aware of the issue half a second later, just as Sojourner came into view across Ownership Square, with Scacia De Rein, riding a chariot drawn by an anteater the size of a horse.

Although still slightly unbelieving Scacia's revelation, the Lady President updated the mechanical mammoth with a wave of stark information.

Ellie received and reciprocated with the Keep's ongoing security developments.

Implications washed over them, emulsifying to a heady blend of high emotion and diminishing options.

Chapter Forty Nine: Mitigating Circumstances

"CCXII: Why must unequal advantage only be acknowledged in silence?

Response: For the advantage would no longer be unequal, as Chance had decreed."

- *The Catechism of Chance (traditional)*

The chariot drew to a halt at L-Event's feet.

Teardrop fluttered down from elephant's howdah in the form of a giant, twirling sycamore seed. The passengers of the chariot had to duck as the golden blade swished pass their heads. Scacia scolded her mischievous familiar as it transformed, unrepentantly, into a golden faux fur stole and draped itself across her shoulders.

Sojourner stepped from the chariot, her mind leaning into Ellie's for support. Her mouth felt dry and her stomach knotted. The mammoth searched for any credence to De Rein's assertions. Hard evidence was proving elusive. It didn't really matter. They knew she was telling the truth.

The Indeterminatrix stepped down from the chariot. "How would you like me to help?" she asked.

"I'm sorry?" said Sojourner.

"There's no need to be bashful, Sojo," chuckled Scacia, cuddling into her stole. "You made it to the top table. We're all friends here. Why don't you show me around your beautiful mammoth and we can throw around some ideas. Get your presidency off on the right path. Make sure you get to stay there for as long as you want to. What do you say?"

Sojourner felt her entire body go numb.

Ellie calculated.

Something drastic was going down at the security transept. De Rein would be no doubt be conscious of the fact soon enough, if she wasn't already aware. Whatever the Lady President did next, it would need to

be decisive.

But why?

Hadn't Scacia's revelation showed her that it didn't make a blind bit of difference?

Sojourner had always been a player in the Chance Coteries' game, she had just not been aware of it. The revolution, the entire motivation for the vast majority of her adult life, had been a narrative directed by De Rein. The cymbiont struggle was little more than a diverting soap opera. Sojourner Hooper-Agogô had been the star of the show. Wasn't it time she got real? What else could she do?

It was time to pick up her award.

"What did you have in mind?" asked the Lady President.

"Nothing too... showy," suggested the Indeterminatrix. "Not straight away, at least. I took a backseat last time, of course. I think, maybe, eventually, we could bring all the PROTEC worlds under our wing in a more direct way. It would take some coaxing. But there's plenty of time for all that. In the meantime, I'll just invest in some new infrastructure or something. How does that sound?"

Sojourner had no understanding of how to react. She suddenly felt very light.

Her body seemed to lose all mass. It was almost as if she were floating. Vaguely perplexed, unnaturally calm, her emotions seemed distant. Disconnected.

Absently, her attention became drawn to the white Claviger, still standing in the chariot. His armoured head abruptly snapped upwards, looking to the sky in shock. He threw his claw-like arms in front of its face in a desperate, pathetic protective gesture.

Something gigantic fell from above.

It drove both Claviger and chariot into the stone floor with unimaginable force. Striking the ground with the sound of a thunder clap, generating a tremor of such vehemence that Sojourner found herself knocked from her preposterous heels.

Lying on her side, the president gazed, wide-eyed at the white anteater, detached from its reins, scampering away, across the square, fleeing in abject terror for its life.

Still upright, Scacia hunched her shoulders, reflexive in fear. She turned for a second to see what was happening, then snatched back her head and stared at the fallen president.

Scacia's eyes were a distillation of child-like disbelief.

Then, the Indeterminatrix was crushed into the ground.

The sickening impact struck Scacia like a colossal mallet, splattering her body into mangled slivers, showering Sojourner with viscera. A hot gout splashed across the president's incredulous face, stinging her eyes.

A second clap of thunder shook the earth and echoed across Ownership Square, reverberating between the great pillars, silencing all other sound.

As the rumble dissipated, so a siren rose. An ear-splitting warning klaxon that the president not only recognized, but knew intimately, the rousing electronic roar of her beloved Ellie.

Sojourner frantically blinked to clear her vision. She wiped her face with her shaking hands and looked up.

L-Event raised her trunk in triumphal rage. Her great pneumatic hooves, driven defiantly into the cracked stone slabs, pulverizing the despised beneath red and gold splattered feet.

The mammoth told the Lady President that she loved her. Her trunk scooped the blood-soaked Sojourner from the ground, tucking her into the safety of the howdah, sealing her within, away from the encroaching chaos.

A few nearby Claviger witnesses began taking potshots with their sidearms, but the rounds were as effective as hailstones against L-Event's tough alloyed hide. The great cymbiont ignored the assault and concentrated on the exit strategy.

The Frugal Reward **had already been summoned and was emerging, silently from the moat. Ellie booted the ship's floodlights, distracting**

attention away from the murder scene. Crowds scattered and panic ensued.

L-Event would have expected some reaction from the Keep's AI by now, but Nonchalance seemed far more preoccupied with continually sweeping its own systems. Something was clearly very wrong with the artificial intelligence. It was most likely Father Christèmas' doing, either by deliberate sabotage or a useful side-effect of the subconscious break-in.

Nonchalance finally dispatched a few more security teams to Ownership Square, but only after repeated requests from Clavigers on the scene. They were sent merely as an afterthought. The death of the Indeterminatrix had, so far, not registered as anything particularly important to the AI.

Ellie advised Sojourner to strap in.

The Lady President obeyed dutifully.

Drifting toward them, *The Frugal Reward* rotated in an elegant arc, flexing its defines systems in a cautionary display for the benefit of the meagre number of Claviger's amassing below. The ship unfolded, extending docking arms to hoist Ellie aboard.

The mammoth attempted to take a step forward, only to find her left foreleg crippled by a sudden and massive systems failure. All her other limbs were functioning normally, but the faulty leg has seized completely. A danger signal spiked through Ellie's systems.

“What's happening!?” screamed Sojourner, snapping out of her daze.

Something was attempting to infiltrate the mammoth's software.

External cams fazed, gathering scratchy visual data on the crippled limb. Veins of fizzing, golden fluid seeped between the plating in Ellie's leg, corroding the hydraulics.

It was Teardrop.

L-Event was enduring the wrath of the liquid cymbiont, zombified by the death of its most beloved biological component. Such was the intensity of Teardrop's assault that the damage inflicted to the leg was

now catastrophic. Ellie listed. Sojourner gritted her teeth, her mind reeling. Dealing with Teardrop's digital assault had to be the priority.

Counterattack.

Within the network, the remains of Teardrop's personality was horrifically distorted. L-Event reached into the rabid cymbiont's derelict code, reconfiguring what remained and shutting down its remaining processes.

Teardrop ceased. Its binding protocols collapsed. The golden fluid of its remains dissipated into vapour.

"We need to leave!" bellowed Sojourner.

The Frugal Reward **reversed, its docking arms grabbing at Ellie awkwardly. It lifted the mammoth, placing intense strain on the engines, and attempted to draw the massive cargo inside.**

Nonchalance briefly returned to its senses and scrambled security drones to intercept. The fleet would be at the Keep in seconds.

Go.

L-Event was only halfway aboard as *The Reward* **accelerated, swooping across the square, hurtling towards the moat at tremendous speed. The ship accelerated, moments from freedom.**

There came a horrendous screech of rending metal.

The sudden acceleration was too much for the docking arms. The right-hand arm sheared off completely, swinging L-Event wild onto the remaining limb. The ship banked right, spinning over the moat as the weight shifted violently.

The Frugal Reward **lost its grip.**

L-Event slipped from the ship's grasp.

The great mechanical beast dropped like a bolder, bellowing her defiance as she plummeted into the black, yawning chasm of the moat.

Chapter Fifty: You May Not Like What You Are About To See

"Then notorious Pyrates, and by them known to be so, they all received Sentence of Death, which every Body must allow proved somewhat unlucky to the poor Fellows."

- *A General History of Robberies and Murders of the most notorious Pyrates (Capt. C. Johnson, 1724)*

The drop into the dark was only a few feet. Bonny felt timbers creak beneath her and the sound of her impact echoed off stone walls. The air was cold and dusty and the dark as pitch as the inside of a tomb.

Bonny blinked, but the blackness persisted. She called out to Chaz.

A cigarette lighter clicked and Chantelle's face appeared about twenty feet away, illuminated by the flickering flame.

"What is this place?" Bonny whispered.

"We're inside the AI's subconscious servers," said Chaz.

"Is that... safe?" Bonny wondered, vaguely recollecting that there had been mention of certain death to any who ventured within the area in question.

"Aye, we're in the meme Harry hid in that book of poems," said Chaz, wafting around the flame in her hand in order to gain some sense of their surroundings. "The Kraken let us in, like."

"The Kraken?" said Bonny, reassured to hear her timeship's name. "Where is she?"

"Busy," said Chaz. "The meme anly lasts a couple seconds, like. The Kraken has to loop it. Stretch it oot. Gerrus more time and that."

"How do we get out of here!?" snapped Anne.

"Howay, man!" exclaimed Chantelle. "Cannit y'see ahm looking? Y'could always help us!"

Bonny's eyes were becoming a little more accustomed to the low level light. She could see the outline of heavy wooden beams above them. There were ropes, wheels and what looked like large, upturned

barrels.

“Bells,” said Bonny, suddenly realizing what she was seeing. “We're in a belfry?”

“Aye, looks like it,” Chaz replied. “Follow us, ah think ah've found the way doon.”

They crept carefully across the creaking wooden floor. The boards were in quite a state of disrepair, with rotten holes and crumbling, damp planks. There was a bitterly cold draft whistling through the cracks.

“Watch yersel,” Chaz warned, “A've foond the stairs. Muckle rickety, like.”

Bonny hung back and observed Chantelle's descent. She thought it would be safer if Chaz checked the stability of the staircase before she followed. The steps spiralled down two floors before Bonny spotted Anne pausing for a smoke by a window.

Although the window was little more than an arrow slit, grey light streamed in, accompanied by a sharp and bracing breeze. Chaz was puffing thoughtfully on her cigarette.

Bonny squeezed next to her in order to peer out of the window.

The landscape was bleak and colourless. Scrubby vegetation poked in tufts between grey boulders and slate shingle. The sky was overcast, flat and dingy. There were no other buildings as far as she was able to see.

It suddenly occurred to Bonny that the vault containing the 2nd Second must be near, probably within the very church in which they now stood.

“Why the change of plan?” asked Anne.

“Sojourner lost it,” said Chantelle, exhaling ruefully. “Proper kicked off. She wor gonna gerrus aal killed, like.”

It sounded to Bonny that Chaz was telling the truth, but she found it hard to accept. The Lady President was the most level headed member of their trio. She had the most to lose out of all of them. Anne supposed

it was conceivable that the pressure had got to her. Anyone can snap when enough is enough.

“Where is she now?” Anne demanded.

“Divvnt knar,” said Chaz. “The Kraken's looking for her. She'll turn up.”

“So, what are we going to do until then?” asked Bonny.

“Find the others,” said Chaz. “Crack the vault. Grab the loot. Fook off.”

She finished her cigarette, defenestrated the stub and turned to continue the descent, into the dark base of the tower. Bonny followed on behind.

A large crack in the wall illuminated the bottom of the stairwell. The floor was littered with rubble, from where an internal wall had collapsed and partially barricaded the exit. The wooden door was slightly ajar and it seemed as though it would be possible for them to squeeze through the gap, one at a time.

Chantelle poked her head through the door and froze.

She slid slowly back inside and drew her pistol. Staring hard at Bonny, Chaz held a finger to her lips and mimed that the pirate should stay put. Bonny rolled her eyes, but did as she was told.

Chantelle stepped through the gap in the door awkwardly, holding her gun in both hands when she was on the other side. She crouched into a defensive stance and walked gingerly across the cracked tiles. She was careful that her steps did not disturb the rubble strewn in front of her.

Bonny peered through the gap to study Chantelle's progress. She drew the pistol she had stolen from the Verger. All she could see was Chantelle's back, walking slowly into the dilapidated nave of the crumbling church.

What on Earth could have had alarmed Chaz so?

Chaz tip-toed further into the nave. There was a huge, gaping hole in the roof that illuminated the space with shafts of ashen daylight.

Pews were shattered and scattered amongst the rubble and crumbling pillars loomed in precarious symmetry.

With her back towards Bonny, it was impossible to see toward what Chaz was creeping, squinting through the narrow gap of the blocked doorway.

On reaching the centre of the nave, Chantelle seemed to relax slightly. She had stopped checking the shadows for possible targets, had risen from her crouch and had let her gun swing free in her right hand. Her gaze was drawn to something on the floor directly in front of her.

It was maddening to Bonny, whose view was still blocked by Chantelle's very presence.

Chaz dragged her left hand over her head and tapped the barrel of her gun on her thigh. She was considering something.

Bonny had had enough. "Is it clear!?" she called through the gap in the door.

Chaz span to face her. "Stay put!" she yelled.

"What's going on?" shouted Bonny. "What is it?"

Chaz started to walk back towards her, looking sheepish. "Look," she said, attempting a placating tone, "Y'need t'stay calm, alreet?"

"I'm perfectly calm!" she snapped. "What's there? What have you seen!?"

Chantelle stopped two feet in front of the gap wearing an embarrassed half-grin, not sure what to say. Eventually she beckoned Bonny to step inside. "Come through," she said. "Ah'll show yee. But, it'll probably be a bit of a shock, like."

Bonny snorted. What was there left in the entirety of creation that could possibly shock her? She clambered through the gap and followed Chantelle back to the centre of the nave.

The wind whistled through the punctured ceiling. Anne squinted up at the pasty sky. She could see no birds flying there and for some reason that felt entirely inappropriate. Bonny swallowed and looked

down at the floor.

There was a body. It was a man, red raw, laid cruciform.

His chest was open wide, the ribcage splayed like butterfly wings. The cavity exposed was hollow, a heartless cave. His face, a crimson mask of anguish, one cindered eye-socket, one dead, glassy-grey fisheye.

A silent, screaming maw.

Anne Bonny had seen worse.

And then she allowed herself to realise.

She gave a short, sharp hiss of denial. A second to let all know she had really meant it.

"Bonny... pet," muttered Chaz.

The unfettered scream of the pirate queen silenced her despicable messenger.

How was such a thing possible? Elementals were just worm-food too? Where was her beautiful demon? This meat mannequin was not him! That single jellied blob was not an eye through which the entire cosmos blazed!

"Who has done such a thing?" hissed the pirate, her voice threatening to break.

"Ah divvnt knar..." Chaz replied. The gun was in her face before she even saw Bonny move.

"Christèmas did this," Anne accused, her eyes shining.

"Ah swear, I divvnt knar," said Chaz, the presence of the gun doing nothing to intimidate her. She shrugged and added, "Maybe it wor, Chris. I dunno. Maybe it wor the Kraken, like."

Bonny's eyes flickered. The Kraken? She had seen the Kraken dismantle people with this kind of precision many times. Chaz claimed the Kraken was near. Why would the Kraken turn on her own captain? A mutiny staged by the very vessel itself?

“Where is the 2nd Second?” Bonny demanded.

Chantelle sniggered.

Bonny roared and thrust the pistol further into Chaz's smirk. A shadow swirled. A blade flashed. Chantelle staggered backwards pointing her own pistol. Bonny raised her sword.

“Calm the fook doon, man!” screamed Chaz, a tinge of glee framing the demand. Part of her was enjoying this. “Stop! Can y’feel it!?”

“What!?” screamed Bonny.

“It's starting,” said Chaz, a grin spreading across her face.

Bonny opened her mouth to shout, but stopped. There was something.

Something was different.

“See?” said Chaz.

In the edges. There was something. A presence.

Footsteps. Running.

“Who's that!?” bellowed Bonny.

“Calm doon!” screamed Chaz. “Listen...!”

They both became aware of the double doors at the far side of the nave.

“Who's there!?” Bonny screamed, training her gun on the door.

Chaz did the same.

Something was coming.

The doors crashed open.

Chapter Fifty One: Hating It Will Not Help

"So poets fly the critics snappish heat,

And sheath their minds in scorn and self-conceit"

- *Another (T. Lovell Beddoes, 1803-1846)*

When Haribeux finally got around to explaining exactly what was going on, Rupert had been rendered dumbstruck by the audacity of their plan.

The stratagem was so convoluted that the act of comprehension seemed to restructure Rupert's means of processing the information. Whilst this sensation was frustrating and uncomfortable, what was worse was how the experience appeared to confirm the certainty of the plan's imminent success.

Godmother Antigone had underestimated Bankside's ambition. Catastrophically so.

Haribeaux, for all his sociopathic tendencies, was an artisan of bewildering ability. His skills as a pharmacologist and confectioner had been transferred to a more transcendental medium, the medium of history itself. His ingredients had been carefully cultivated and selected, the processes practiced and refined. Now, using Serendipity Keep as his cauldron, the pièce de résistance was simmering away, so close to completion.

Rupert wondered what sort of ingredient he himself might be, then grimaced at the over-stretched metaphor.

He stared out across the Thames at St Paul's. The mists of the river played with the image, causing the outline to flicker. Rupert found that, if he squinted, the cathedral appeared as a ghostly, medieval gothic spire, licked by spectral flames.

Widening his eyes, the haze of Old St Paul's was obliterated by Wren's iconic baroque dome.

Would Chaucer have believed that St Paul's could ever fall? Could the parish of the present day imagine that there had ever been another cathedral, before Sir Christopher built his?

Rupert leaned back in the armchair and sipped his glass of claret. Haribeaux had been gone for quite some time now. Rupert had briefly considered escape, but also knew he would find no sympathy with the Godmother. Where else could he run to? Being a clerk of the Ministry of Insinuation would find him persona non grata in every other quarter of the Empire.

There were worse prison cells than Bankside's upper gallery. Rupert had already taken a shower, at Haribeaux's insistence. His acrid body odour was apparently a side-effect of the experiment and was in danger of corroding Haribeaux's sensitive olfactory sensors.

Afterwards, Rupert had found himself something clean to wear from Father Christèmas' resplendent rail of clothes. He chose a simple white shirt and grey slacks. Then, with a towel around his shoulder to dry his lank black hair, he had slumped into an armchair to study the view. When it became clear that he would be waiting for a long time, he helped himself to some wine from the adjacent drinks cabinet.

Father Christèmas certainly kept an excellent cellar. Rupert could not remember ever tasting a finer claret. The fact that he was able to notice such a thing suggested that, perhaps, Rupert was becoming more like his old self again. Although, after the ordeal he had been through, did he even possess an 'old self' to which he could compare?

There was laughter on the corridor. Christèmas had returned.

The Father walked into the gallery, in good spirits but clearly weary. He was grey-skinned with bags under his eyes, but the corners of his mouth betrayed a satisfied smirk. The crushed velvet of his red suit was rumpled and matted and he swung a plastic carrier bag from his wrist.

His hands were stained rusty red.

Haribeaux followed close behind.

Rupert began to rise from his seat, but Christèmas urged him to remain where he was.

“Please, relax,” he insisted. “We've all had a busy day. I understand that Harry has filled you in?”

Rupert nodded.

“And what do you think?” asked Christèmas.

Rupert opened his mouth and said nothing.

Christèmas snorted and added, “You can be honest. We're all friends here.”

Rupert shook his head. “It's heresy,” he replied.

“At the very *least*,” chuckled the Father. “Although, I've just been having a little chat with the loa and they were quite amused by our plans. They had already suspected something was up, of course. They didn't take offence, though. So, you could say we fall short of your actual *blasphemy*. But, yeah. We've ideas above our station, certainly.”

“The loa..?” whispered Rupert.

Christèmas eased himself into a chair and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I mustn't get too comfy,” he muttered. “Still things to do. Incidentally, Harry - Chaz had to tweak things a bit her end. The Lady President went a bit off-script. She's sorted it now, but left a bit of a mess.”

“Shit happens,” said Haribeaux. “I'll go and get started on the cradle then.”

“Yeah, cheers, Harry,” Christèmas replied. “You've played a blinder, mate.”

“You look fucked, Chris,” said Harry as stomped from the gallery. Christèmas let out a weary chuckle.

“Negotiating with the loa can take it out of you,” sighed the Father, glancing over at Rupert, who was staring back at him in incredulity. “We've got things to discuss,” said Christèmas. “But I want to get cleaned up first. You really don't need to worry. You're going back to the Ministry and all will be well.”

“The loa... protect the Empire...” mumble Rupert.

“Yes, they do,” said the Father, clambering to his feet with a groan. “And they will continue to do so. As will *you*, my friend.” He began to

pad his way toward the bathroom. “I'll explain after a shit and a shower.”

Christèmas suddenly remembered the plastic bag he was carrying. He turned and tossed it to Rupert, who caught it instinctively.

“One left,” said Chris. “See if you can find a nice container for it. Actually, there’s a stack of bible boxes over in that corner. One of them should do the job. I thought we could give it to Antigone. More appropriate than a gold watch, don’t you think?”

He left the gallery.

Tentatively, Rupert peered into the plastic bag. It contained what looked like a piece of raw meat. On closer examination, Rupert was horrified to discover that it was, in fact a human heart. His lapsed medical studies had left him with very little squeamishness, but there was something unnerving about this particular organ. It was *situs invertus*, a mirror image of an ordinary heart.

Such a mutation was rare in humans. But, in species with dual cardiovascular processes, such an organ was standard. There were several rituals where an offering like this could be used to appease the loa.

Rupert shivered.

He finished his claret to steady his nerves, then began to search the gallery for a suitable box for the heart.

Chapter Fifty Two: Schrödinger's Standoff

"Faction Paradox shall not interfere with the management of the Chance Coterie's designated area of causality, unless specifically requested to do so by the Coteries themselves."

- *The Neam Treaty, Article 107*

The Kraken looped over and over.

To cope with the increasing stresses, the two second bubble expanded steadily in all directions. Within, local time stretched out. Ten seconds became thirty. Thirty became an hour. One hour became two.

The timeship eased back. It slotted a trap door into the Keep above and opened it. Two biological components dropped inside. The Kraken scanned for the final element, tracing the relevant line of biodata, searching for the ideal place to intercept.

A node of change. The mammoth obliterates the De Rien bloodline in a punctuation point of righteous rage. The mammoth breaks. The mammoth falls.

There.

The cymbiont's alloyed shell would help protect the final element from the worst excesses of transit.

The mammoth tumbled into the chasm. The Kraken stretched out a tentacle and whipped the hurtling automaton within the timeship's influence, firing it deep within the bubble of certainty.

The Kraken was reasonably pleased with the success of the manoeuvre. Ever the perfectionist, the timeship was mildly irked that it could not have done more to reduce the mammoth's speed of descent.

No matter. All the elements were now in place.

At the end of its spiral, the Kraken waited in rapt anticipation, the final few microseconds for extraction.

Signals from the future caused the ships tendrils to quiver. Chances

asserted into inevitabilities.

Sojourner remembered the day she met Rex.

Ellie had taken a big spill back then too, harvesting a tricky seam on Makemake. Plates had shifted beneath the mammoth's feet at exactly the wrong moment and L-Event had tumbled sideways down a ravine. The howdah's gyroscopics had been on the fritz and Sojourner hadn't been strapped in at the time. She must have bounced off every hard edge, inside of the howdah and ended up with a broken tibia and an impressive collection of cuts and bruises.

Knocked cold, she had awoken to a warm voice calling her name. He had smelled incredible, that citrusy cologne and just the right amount of sweat. Rough but gentle fingers had peeled open her eyes and a light had flashed to provoke a response.

He was just a scent, a sound and a touch.

Then a silhouette. It had never occurred to her before, but her visual memories of her husband started with Rex as pure shadow.

The darkness gave way to grey light. Sojourner snapped back into the now. Disorientated. Nauseous. Ellie rolled over and over. Alarms blared. The ping of a proximity alarm grew shorter and shorter. Grey boulders filled the view screen.

The Lady President screwed her eyes shut and braced herself.

The mammoth smashed into the monochrome landscape. Splintered rock, scrub and clouds of desiccated soil mushroomed hundreds of feet into the air. The sound of impact was apocalyptic.

The boom resonated across the wasteland. Debris and grit fell like rain.

L-Event lay on her side, flattened and split, at the bottom of the gaping crater. Partially buried, the great beast resembled an excavation site of fossilized remains. As the seconds ticked away, the impact resonance faded and the dust settled. Silence returned to the morbid land.

Sojourner peeled open her eyes.

Ellie was gone.

Sojourner was alone inside her head, like a lost child in an empty supermarket.

In turn, her physical self was also alone, suspended with the twisted carcass of her missing friend. She took a moment to clasp her grief and set it aside. The howdah had crumpled around her and everything contained within was scattered and smashed. An emergency door had popped on impact and a chilly breeze now wove through the wreckage.

The safety belt dug into her flesh. The angle in which her seat had settled meant that she was leaning forward and dangling slightly. Releasing the catch, she dropped a few inches, landing on all fours. Giving herself the once over, the president could not see any injuries, although this took a little while to verify as she was still coated in Scacia De Rein's blood.

She scanned the devastation, trying to locate the final resting place of the cupboard, where she had stashed the guns and Ellie's souldrive. The remains of the kitchen area were piled in a heap in the far corner. Sojourner gingerly carried herself over the mountain of broken belongings, tearing a split in the skirt of her ball gown in order to assist her ascent.

Reaching the cupboard, she prised it open and found the two pistols and the back pack containing the souldrive. They were strewn, but otherwise all in working condition. Slipping on the heavy back pack and with a gun in each hand, Sojourner slid back down the pile of debris and crawled out of the emergency door.

The Lady President made a special point not to have a last look around the howdah.

Sentiment, for now, was unaffordable.

The wind was bitter and Sojourner found herself confused as to her whereabouts. Ellie had dropped into a ravine and the wide open space in which she now found herself was clearly not at the bottom of the same. Scrambling up the side of Ellie's alloyed remains, in order to gain a better view, Sojourner spied a derelict church, some way in the distance.

There was nothing else to see.

Although.

There was something else. Something different.

She looked up into the blank sky. There was nothing to see.

Something was there.

Her skin prickled. Primal areas of her brain informed her that it was time to go.

Sojourner slid down the flank of the metal carcass and broke into a run as soon as her feet hit the soil. She sprinted up the incline of the impact crater, took a second to relocate the church, then ran, flat out, towards the crumbling building.

She gripped the guns tight, swinging them in an effort to increase her acceleration.

Something invisible loomed above her. Sojourner screwed up her face. Tears of undiluted fear threatened to flood her eyes. She ran, ran like the devil himself was at her heels.

The church grew closer. Grey stone and black cracks. Exposed beams spilled tumbling slate.

This was her sanctuary? Was the devil really behind her or waiting within those derelict walls?

Something was closing in from all sides.

Moving forward began to seem like a mistake. It didn't matter anymore. Destiny had interceded.

She was carried by the momentum of fate.

Her saliva tasted sour. Bare feet torn by grit. The door was off its hinges. Sojourner flew inside. The world beyond the churches walls simply ceased behind her.

It was so close now.

Everywhere.

Voices screamed in the dark. Nothing could stop her. Double doors in front of her. Sojourner shoulder charged them and the doors burst apart.

Shouts and screams. Guns drawn.

Chantelle.

Bonny.

The Lady President gasped for breath and levelled a pistol at each of them.

“Was this you!?” shrieked Bonny.

“What the fook y’playin at!?” bellowed Chaz.

Panting, Sojourner mouthed, “What?” and clicked the safety catches on her pistols.

Bonny and Chaz followed suit.

Sojourner was aware of a body on the floor.

“You bathed in his *blood*!?” roared Bonny, incredulous.

Sojourner slowly walked forward. She did not take her eyes from the other two women, but needed to see the body on the ground.

The Hussar.

“I didn't do this,” gasped the president.

“You're covered in blood!” exclaimed Bonny.

“It's De Rein's!” yelled Sojourner. “Never mind that! Something else is happening!”

She could see from the look in Anne's eyes that she had no idea what the president was talking about.

Chantelle, however, clearly understood and smiled like a serpent.

“What's going on, Chaz!” snapped Sojourner. The walls seemed to be closing in. The three of them were now the sides of a triangle, the Hussar's body spread out across the shape.

The gun in Sojourner's right hand covered Chantelle. The gun in her left covered Bonny. Both Ann's and Chaz's guns were trained on the Lady President, while the pirate pointed her blade at the Cousin, who's shadow-hammer reflected the sentiment back at Bonny. A lethal equilibrium.

Their geometry hummed with resonance. Sojourner saw it. Felt it. Understood.

"It's a ritual," she whispered.

The world beyond their three-sided frame was no longer there. Their eyes flicked back and forth between the eyes of each of their targets. Threads drew together. The weaving of histories.

"Bonny, put your gun down," said Sojourner, slowly.

"Aah wouldn't if I wor yee, pet," said Chantelle.

"Don't listen to her," said the president. "It's a set up. Can't you see? The whole thing is some sort of ritual."

"You lower your gun if you're so sure!" snapped Bonny.

"I will!" said Sojourner. "If you promise to do the same!"

"Aal kill the pair of yez if y'do!" warned Chaz, with a grin.

Something was happening. The Hussar's body began to unravel, decomposing into wafting strands of biodata and brilliant light.

"Ah y'ready?" chirped Chantelle. "Shall I count us down, like?"

"What?" screamed Bonny.

"Divvnt worry," said Chaz. "When I gets to zero, we'll just see wor happens, OK?"

"What happens, Chaz!?" bellowed Sojourner. "What are we doing here!?"

"Making history, hen!" yelled her Cousin and started her countdown. "Three!"

"I'll kill you!" screamed Bonny.

“That's the spirit, pet! Two!”

“Chaz! Wait!”

“One!”

“No! Stop!”

“Zero!”

Shots rang out.

Who lived?

Who died?

There were no witnesses, only perpetrators and victims and those were one and the same.

The bullets hit. The bullets missed. The bullets grazed. The bullets killed.

All those things were true when the island certainty dissolved.

Something was born within the hail of bullets. Life from death. A definitive forged from indeterminacy.

As the bubble collapsed, strands of history were clipped and crossbred. Borrowed biodata, observed from an impossible tangent. The pirate. The president. The drug-peddler. Histories, like maps stacked on top of one another, creating a new topography, charting an uber-history, tracing the shape of a new and complex existence.

Separate and massive. Spilling across continuums. An entity impossible to accurately describe. Like a shape in the clouds. A creature made of intertwined histories.

The Kraken, the nursemaid to the newborn, scooped the infant loa into its loving tentacles and clutching it close, flipped back along its previous trajectory. It squeezed by its past self on the way out.

The Kraken of the past could sense what was coming.

Something was different.

Epilogue

Something was going on, south of the river.

Word had spread through Parliament that the loa, the sentinels of the borders of the Eleven Day Empire, were behaving in a most unusual manner.

When the chatter had finally reached the ears of the Ministry of Insinuation, the word used was 'rambunctious'. It had come from the lips of Father Torquemada, on his return to active duty. It was a characteristically whimsical adjective from the Father, but judging by the reports, it seemed not entirely inappropriate.

Godmother Antigone instructed Torquemada to hold the fort while she returned to Bankside. The Godmother omitted to mention that she had been unable to contact Cousin Rupert since she had left him in Cousin Haribeaux's charge.

On the tip of Westminster pier, Godmother Antigone tapped an impatient foot.

She stroked the beak of her owl mask with irritation, having already rung the bell for Cousin Kharon's attention. The Godmother hated her schedule being dictated at the whim of that fish-faced imbecile.

When the ferry finally appeared through the dense banks of mist, Kharon was not alone.

Two other figures stood with of the ferryman, masked and impassive. As the boat drifted closer, Antigone spied Cousin Rupert at the bow, his arms piled high with vellum dossiers. Behind him, the Aquister Primate himself, Father Christèmas, in his ludicrous narwhal skull and red cardinal's robes.

The skull's elongated tusk had been cut in half. The mask had also been altered, so that it now hung from his face with the sawn-off ivory spear pointing downwards, where it clanked against the silver chronometer, swinging from the chain around his neck.

The top of the skull had been painted with circular yellow face, sporting cheerful eyes and gormless smile.

Christèmas was using the other half of the tusk as a walking cane,

resting both his hands on top of the spiral shaft as Kharon pushed the punt across the black waters of the Thames.

Beneath her owl mask, Antigone swallowed.

The boat slid to rest alongside the pier and Christèmas gestured for Rupert to ascend the rickety wooden stairs. The Godmother's underling was unable to hold her gaze as he alighted. Mistress and servant said nothing to one another as the Aquister Primate clambered onto the pier, using his walking tusk to steady himself.

"Felicitations from Bankside!" boomed Christèmas, with a curt bow. "Rupert, me old son, why don't you run along, back to the Ministry, while Antigone and I have a little chat? Make sure you put the kettle on, have a nice cup of tea and put your feet up for a bit, won't you? Leave all that filing until after."

"Very good, Aquister," muttered Rupert and hastily turned to leave.

"Oh, but before you go, bung us that file, there, please," Christèmas added, pointing to the dossier on the top of the stack in Rupert's arms. He fished out the document in question and handed it over.

"Thank you," said the Father Christèmas. "You've been a great help. We'll be in touch."

Cousin Rupert nodded nervously, then bustled away along the pier.

He did not once glance up at the Godmother.

Christèmas turned to Kharon and instructed him to give them five minutes.

The boatman nodded and switched on his headphones.

"Shall we?" said Christèmas, gesturing for Antigone to walk with him.

"What is this about, Father?" asked the Godmother, levelly.

"We need to conclude our business," said Christèmas with a cheerful trill. He tapped the point of the tusk against the wooden boards of the pier.

"'Business'?" said Antigone.

"The 2nd Second," said Christèmas. "Surely, you haven't forgotten?"

"I was under the impression that we had resolved that matter?" said the Godmother, moving off along the pier.

"Well, we have *now*," Christèmas agreed, following her step. "I never would have thought you, of all people, would have stooped as to anything as tacky as setting us a honey-trap! Really, Antigone. I'm flattered that you would hate me so much as to compromise your principles in this way."

"It was for the security of the Grandfather's protocols," stated Antigone. "We merely used your own weakness against you."

Christèmas chucked, "Oh, I'm so glad we can, at last, speak freely about all this! You *did* manage to catch my little magpie eye, that's true enough. But what you *missed* was that you had hidden your appealing shiny object within a machine that could make me an even *more* appealing, much *shinier* object, if I just added the right ingredients."

"What have you done?" asked the Godmother. "The loa are behaving in an... *unusual* manner."

"Don't worry," said Christèmas. "They're just over excited. The pitter-patter of tiny events. It was Harry, really. We'd knocked up a scale model of the AI's subconscious servers. So we could rehearse the job.

"But, when we discovered the 2nd Second was a stitch up, planned by your good self, we fucked the whole thing off. Fair play, you'd tricked us. Kudos. We'd almost walked right into it. Harry, meanwhile, had been tinkering. He'd discovered an interesting side effect during the test runs on our model."

"Which was?" asked Antigone.

"Harry found," Christèmas explained, "that if you stacked up a number of personal histories, within the meme implant he'd perfected and spliced a cross-section of those histories, from in a non-linear trajectory, you could create yourself a new, separate and entirely

autonomous entity."

"What are your burbling about?" sighed the Godmother.

"If we could find the right sort of compatible histories, we could slot sections of them together and build ourselves a baby loa!" boomed Father Christèmas, laughing at the audacity of his own words.

"Are you suggesting that Bankside now has its own, *personal* **loa?" snorted Antigone.**

"I'm am not suggesting any such thing," Christèmas replied. "I'm *telling* **you, that is** *exactly* **what we have got. And as that is now the case,** *this* **is for you!"**

He stopped and slapped the vellum dossier into Antigone's arms. The Godmother was taken by surprise and staggered back a step. "What is this?" she snapped.

"A copy of the new treaty," said the Father. "Bankside's going independent."

"You're being absurd," Antigone declared, with the merest hint of a waver in her voice.

"More than likely," admitted Christèmas, from behind his smiling yellow face. "That was always part of our remit after all. But, we're switching things up a little. South of the river is *our* **manor now. We shall, of course, keep cordial diplomatic relations with Parliament and continue to curate the Bankside collection on their behalf, in perpetuity."**

"Parliament will never concede to this," snapped the Godmother.

"Oh, I think they can be persuaded," said the Father, "This treaty will, after all, be *your* **legacy."**

Antigone froze.

"It's time to step down, Antigone, love," said Christèmas. "Scooch off to the backbenches. You've earned your rest. Leave the Ministry with an unblemished record."

"I *am* **the Ministry!" hissed the Godmother.**

“No, you're just a bitter, old relic from one of the shittier Houseworld bloodlines,” sneered Christèmas. “A bloodline that no fucker can even remember. House Urquineath! The only other notable alumnus of said shithole, a defrocked ponce, who gambled away what little assets his House possessed. He must have kept Serendipity Keep in business, back in the day. Bit embarrassing for his House, mind. I assume that's why you played such an integral part in hammering out the Neam Treaty?”

The Godmother went to answer, but Father Christèmas cut her short. He didn't care. He was on a roll.

“So, you stopped the fop from returning to the Chance Coteries. Poor old House Urquineath must have been pretty much bankrupt by then anyway, eh? At least he couldn't possibly embarrass you any further, could he? Except, maybe when he hooked up with that feral timeship and cruised the more parochial stretches of history, picking up and deflowering impressionable girls of the lesser species!”

Even masked, it was possible to observe the Godmother visibly wince at this brutal summary. It was a fundamental shame. A shame so deep as to inspire this once proud noblewoman to seek absolution in the service of Grandfather Paradox.

“You broke the Neam Treaty,” Christèmas reminded her. “You tried to frame the Aquister Primate. Your position within the Faction is completely untenable.”

“If I go down, then so do you,” stated the Godmother.

“Which is why I am presenting this solution,” said Christèmas. “I'll keep your dirty little secret. You can retire with your reputation intact. Rupert will be promoted to Godfather and he will run the Ministry. He will be Parliament's only point of contact with Bankside from now on in. You and I never need to speak again. You finally get what you want, Antigone. I will no longer be your problem.

“What's more, you can be the hero of the hour, as the broker of the deal that averted civil unrest. Bankside will remain part of the Empire, at least notionally. Parliament have always kept us at arm’s length anyway. Now that we have our own loa, it makes sense for everyone that we widen that gap.”

“Human beings constructing a 'loa'?” scoffed Antigone. “That's like a bacteria building a primate.”

“Indeed,” said the Father. “The process is called 'evolution'. So, do we have a deal?”

The Godmother paused, silently gauging her options.

She opened the dossier in her hand, flicking through the heavy pages with tentative disdain.

Christèmas had outflanked her. Was this deal he was now offering a closing flourish of respect to a worthy adversary or the final humiliation of a despised foe?

“What's this?” she said, hold up a leathery schematic.

“That?” said the Father, innocently. “Oh, just a little sweetener. We don't want you getting bored during your retirement, do we? I understand the Chance Coteries are a little unstable at the moment. Something about an assassination and a catastrophic AI malfunction? Massive economic instability. A gaping power vacuum. Someone with the right set of memetic algorithms and a fair amount of free time on their hands might be able reconfigure Serendipity Keep into something of use, wouldn't you say?”

“And what are these names here?” Antigone went on, pointing to another document. “New acolytes? 'Cousin Cecilia'? 'Little Sister Shotgun'?”

“New staff, yes,” said Christèmas. “We've taken the feral timeship on as a nursemaid. Skip the formalities. Straight to Cousin for the Kraken. Anne Bonny is on board for a trial period as a Little Sibling. We'll handle the initiations. It could go either way with her. We'll keep Parliament posted on that one.”

“And promotions..?” she said.

“Yes, of course. For their sterling work. *Father* **Haribeaux,** *Mother* **Chantelle,” he replied, then cleared his throat before adding, “***Godfather* **Christèmas.”**

The Godmother slammed the dossier shut and stared at Christèmas.

Water lapped at the pier's edge and the tinny hiss of Kharon's headphones circled like a persistent mosquito.

Christèmas tapped his cane on the wooden planks, leaving tiny dents in the damp surface.

"You know what really irritates me about the Great Houses?" he said, eventually. "It's how they continue to fight this War on a principle that they don't even hold anymore. They used to claim that history was sacrosanct. You couldn't rewrite it. Not a single line." He punctuated the sentence with a short, mirthless laugh.

"They soon changed their tune when it suited them, didn't they?" he said, twirling his walking cane. "'Sorry, we've changed our minds, it's fine! Time *can* be rewritten after all!' Fucking hypocrites! Can't you see, Antigone? The War is completely *irrelevant*. Whoever wins, the Great Houses, the Enemy. Even if it's down to the last man standing. Whoever that is, they will be one of *us*. The Grandfather's point has been *proven*. Which is probably why he didn't feel the need to stick around."

Christèmas turned and wandered back towards the punt.

Antigone followed in silence.

The Aquister Primate descended the wooden steps and hopped aboard the ferry for his final trip south.

"I almost forgot," he sighed, reaching down onto the deck and lifting up a beautiful wooden box. It was about the size and shape of a bible or a dictionary, black lacquered with brass catches and hinges.

He slid the box onto the pier at Godmother Antigone's feet.

"A goodbye present," said Godfather Christèmas.

He rapped his cane twice on the deck and Cousin Kharon pushed the ferry away from Westminster, across the dark water. The boat circled in a wide arc, heading east, back towards Bankside.

Antigone watched as boat headed into the haze of encroaching fog. Christèmas turned and waved as the mist enveloped him. The Godmother did not wave back. She just stood and waited until the ferry was completely out of sight before she stooped to pick up the box.

Ω

There she is, just there.

Walking through the old colliery in the dark. No one else about. Not surprised. It's very cold.

Sojourner.

Still barefoot, in her torn dress. She looks dead on her feet. She's lost her guns somewhere, but she still has her back pack with its very precious cargo.

Her house looks funny without the mammoth stood next to it. Sojourner looks sad, doesn't she?

Poor little Sojourner. I almost want to tell her that her mammoth will stand in the same spot again.

One day. (You can even see that day from here, if you squint.)

Seems a shame to spoil that surprise for her though. She's going to be scooped into the arms of her family in a second. They'll be tears of relief and joy and questions, questions, questions.

So many questions.

We should leave them to it. It looks like things will be fine here. For the time being, at least.

If we scoot back, way over here, to Bankside, we can have a peek at what they're doing.

Chris is walking into the upper gallery. Harry is mixing cocktails. Bonny is drunk. She looks a little grumpy, doesn't she? Sitting there, staring into her glass. Maudlin.

Look at Chaz! She's dancing with a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other. Big grin.

The Kraken on the balcony is looking at us.

Chaz throws her arms around Chris's neck, laughing. They're celebrating.

What a lovely moment. Let's hold it there for a second.

Ah.

That looks a bit...

When you freeze it like that, the laughs look like grimaces.

And their eyes look really scary. All wide and glassy. Bared teeth.

It is kind of fascinating though, isn't it? But creepy.

The Kraken is giving us a funny look.

Let's stop this. Leave them to their celebrations.

Let's go.

Author's Afterword

I wrote about Sojourner's initiation into Faction Paradox in the short story 'Now or Thereabouts', which appeared in the anthology *Faction Paradox: A Romance In Twelve Parts* **(Obverse Books, 2011).**

It was a neat little story, written with no sense that there was anything further to say about the protagonist, who was then named 'Ceol'.

However, while Philip Purser-Hallard was writing the closing story of the same anthology, he made a request to the authors of the previous eleven tales. His story, 'A Hundred Words From A Civil War', took the form of one hundred linking 'drabbles' - a drabble being a piece of short fiction of exactly one hundred words in length. This 'drabbleplex' was set in Phil's sandbox at the end of time, The City of the Saved, where every human who ever lived is reborn at the moment of their death, into a hi-tech, secular afterlife.

Phil asked each author to write their own drabble, which he could then shuffle into his drabbleplex. Each tale would involve a character from the respective authors' own story, reconstituted in the City of the Saved, thus linking all the stories in the collection.

It was a beautiful idea. The problem was, I hadn't the first clue what Ceol might have done next. In search of inspiration, I checked my

phone's memo app. This app is where I jot all the random things that serve no obvious purpose, whenever they drop into my head. This is normally while I'm stuck on the tube or waiting for a bus that never comes.

There, amongst the disparate words and phrases that I had no recollection of ever writing, I found the pair of them - 'The Lady President and L-Event' - five words in a row and no other context.

That was it. Ceol became a president and lived inside a giant mechanical elephant. Obviously.

I wrote my hundred words and Ellie and the president appeared in the City of the Saved.

Years later, when I first pitched *Weapons Grade Snake Oil* **to Stuart Douglas at Obverse, I wanted to take a load of crime-fiction tropes and clichés and give them a Faction spin (Faction Paradox are always described as a 'time-travelling, criminal, voodoo cult'. I felt like we'd seen a fair bit about their time-travelling, their voodoo and their cultish ways, and not quite so much about their criminality).**

So, there would be a heist that goes wrong, and someone losing everything on the turn of a card. There would be a Bonnie and Clyde style thrill-killer couple, and a reformed criminal would be dragged back against their will to do 'one more job'.

Being as we had already seen that Ceol would somehow part ways with the Faction, ending up as the president of somewhere-or-other, she seemed like the perfect candidate to get called back into service. But, what had the robot elephant got to do with anything?

This train of thought would eventually lead to the cymbionts and the PROTEC worlds.

The lesson here is that you never know when some seemingly irrelevant stray thought will lead you to a symbiotic techno-socialist utopia, so always take notes.